
My Own Experience of Volunteering at The Samaritan House

For my community engagement project I decided to volunteer at The Samaritan House. I did not know much about them or what I did when I first found them and decided to check them out, but just the name Samaritan House made me feel pretty confident that the work I would do there would be good and beneficial to the community. The word Samaritan means being a person who is generous in helping those in distress and that's just what the Samaritan House does. The Samaritan House of Binghamton is a non-profit charity that works in a really poor area in Binghamton. They do their work out of a really small house and even though they could make good use of a bigger space, they do not complain and are very grateful for what they are able to do with the resources they have.

The mission statement of The Samaritan House is to "Provides free household furnishings, children's clean usable clothing and miscellaneous items, personal hygiene products, toiletries" but they do so much more than that. Basically, they accept donations from the community of clothing, furniture, hygienic products, bedding, cookware etc. and they give it to needy families who come in for free. Most of the items they have are donated from people in the community, which is extremely impressive. People who do not have much themselves find something that they do not need and are willing to give it away to help out someone in a similar or worse situation.

When I was volunteering part of what I did was get the donations from people and sort them into the proper places. Some people would tell me where the items came from and while some people just had things laying around, I watch others let go of precious items or give things up that they were still using but felt that someone else could make more use of than them. That to me, demonstrated the true meaning of charity. It is one thing to just give up things that you aren't using anymore, but to give up things you use everyday for someone else to make use of them is even more amazing. Everyone who came in with a donation seemed really eager to donate and to be doing something to help and the volunteers at the Samaritan House seemed excited to receive these donations.

The Samaritan House is mainly geared to assist people who have homes, but not much else and need help or furniture or clothing for them or their children, however, they open up the house for people who are homeless or for some other reason do not have a way of getting cleaned up to come in and to clean themselves up, shower, shave etc. They also have contacts in other charitable organizations in Binghamton and refer people to other places for things such as meals, shelter, medical care or employment opportunities that they do not have the resources to offer on the premises.

During my short time there, I saw many people come to the Samaritan House, just not knowing where to go and figuring that a place called the Samaritan House would have people who can help them. These people were absolutely correct. Dennis, the manager, was able to help everyone who came in anyway he could and contacted people who can do anything he could. People who walked in scared and confused suddenly found themselves in tangled in a network of people who were all devoted to helping them out and seeing them through whatever

obstacles and struggles life has thrown their way.

At first, to be honest, I was rather unimpressed with the services they were doing. I knew what they were doing was good, but I felt more could be done. After spending some time there I realized to what they do than is stated in their mission statement. As I worked and heard the interactions the other volunteers had with the people who came in for help and with each other I realized that what they are doing is extremely meaningful and that if they had more resources they would be doing more.

The problems that this organization faces and tries to help out with are issues that exist all through the country and the world. Many people need help figuring out where to go when they are in trouble and there are many people who live in empty houses because although they could afford to live in a house they simply do not have the money to afford furniture. It is not an issue that we think about often unfortunately. When we think about poverty, we tend to think about it in the extremes. We think of homelessness, hunger, desperation, and sickness. However, in the Binghamton area and in the world, there are many people who can afford to have a place to live and to eat but cannot afford anything else. We take things like furniture and clothing for granted because most of us have never had to worry about whether we would have clothes or a bed to sleep on. However, the reality for many people is that sometimes the choice is between having enough clothing or furniture or having enough food to eat. In that instance the choice is simple, but organizations like Samaritan House exist because nobody should have to make that choice. Binghamton has an issue with poverty, but they also have a lot of community-aided organizations that exist to help deal with this issue.

My 8 hours working with Samaritan House were spent helping collect donations, organizing the storage spaces and doing odd tasks that needed to be done. Most of the volunteers at Samaritan house are local people and many were elderly people who were retired and wanted to spend their free time doing something meaningful instead of just sitting at home. They spend time mending any clothing that had small tears. Because the volunteers were mainly older people, they were very appreciative to have me around because "a young man like you can do the heavy lifting". I did not think I would fit in well because there was nobody that was my age, but I was wrong. I felt very accepted there and everyone was very accepting, friendly, kind and helpful. The manager even told me about how he was happy to have a Binghamton University student because he runs the scoreboard at some of Binghamton's basketball games and "it was nice to have a fellow Bearcat around. I felt really good about being able to be helpful and although at some points I did not feel like I was doing anything important, but the gratitude from everyone around me made me feel like I am an asset.

While doing this project I learned a lot about the Binghamton community. First of all, even though I knew that Binghamton was an area that had an issue with poverty, I didn't realize how bad it was in places. Poverty looks different in different place and I was just a little surprised by it. It is far more visible here than in my neighborhood back at home. However, in contrast Binghamton has many more charitable organizations that try to help out poor people who live here. The community outreach seems to be more widespread and people take it very personally. In some places it seems people do community service because they need to or to build their resume, but the people of Binghamton seem to do it because they generally care and wish to help others and to improve their community.

This project also showed me that when a community works together they can have really great

results. While I was looking for a place to volunteer I looked into a lot of organizations. The one thing they all seemed to have in common is they all received a lot of their resources from people within the community. Charities depend on the community for support and having such a strong bond inside of the community means that you can always find a helping hand and that the community is really looking to support it's members instead of doing the easy thing and just ignoring the issue as many other communities do.

The biggest thing I learned how isolated the campus is. I have always know that big university campuses tend to have a different feel than the town that they are around. After being in Binghamton University for 4 months, I thought I have had a good idea of the feel of Binghamton but doing this project made me realize how wrong I was. The campus has a very different atmosphere than the neighboring town and it is like being in 2 different places. I realized that the campus is big and kind of closed off from what is going on outside.

I have done a lot of community service before. I have worked with soup kitchens, pantries and I have volunteered to help children and I have always loved it. I knew that community service was good but I was always doing service in communities that i was very familiar with. This project made me leave my comfort zone a bit. I had to work in a community that is basically completely new to me and meet people who not only have different lifestyles, but are from a very different atmosphere than I do.

I spoke to the manager about volunteering there further and he said he would love to have me, but honestly, I am not sure if I want to continue to volunteer there. I feel as though I want to volunteer somewhere else. I had a lot of fun volunteering with young children in the past and was considering doing that. If not, i was considering doing some volunteering around animals. Although I have not decided what I would want to do, I am very certain that I want to dedicate some of my spare time to volunteer work while I am in college.