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How Would You Like to Visit a Nursing Home?

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PERI SMILOW

How would you like to visit a nursing home? Is your gut reaction, "No way," "No thank you," or "Not today"? Why? What images come to you when you think of visiting a nursing home? Do you remember a relative who lived in one? Do you think of people who are sick and dying in a depressing hospital-like room that is sterile and smelling of chemical cleansers and urine? Do you think of your volunteer activities in high school when you performed with the high school choir during the holidays for the old people in the "home" down the block? Perhaps you worked as a candy striper or visited a nursing home with a youth group? What do you remember? Is there one particular image that jumps to mind? A smell that fills your nostrils? A story you remember? A memory that haunts you?

How do you think it feels to be trapped in a body that does not work? Legs refuse to walk. Arms cannot hug. Eyes will not see. Mouths cannot speak. What happens to your self-esteem when you wake up, morning after morning, needing assistance to reach the bathroom? How do you suppose it might affect you to be spoken to as a child or patted on the hand or the head as a beloved pet might be, simply because you lack the independence expected of an adult? How many "grumpy" old people do you know? Can you think of any good reasons why these people might be "grumpy"?

How do you feel when you think of "those people" who are shut away in nursing homes, left alone in dark apartments, awaiting visitors? Perhaps you feel some guilt. Maybe you know someone who lives in a nursing home whom you keep meaning to visit. Is it possible that you are terrified that someday it may be you who is the forgetful old person? Or maybe you recognize that the fear is not of what you may someday become; rather, it is of who and what you are now. Does the forgetful, institutionalized elderly person reflect your own fear back at you?

If you had an opportunity to change the life of another human being, to cross barriers and face fear, to do what all others said could not be done, would you do it?

KIDS WANT TO MATTER TO SOMEONE

I was scared that the old people wouldn't like me. (Journal entry, MAGIC ME/Boston participant)

Educators acknowledge that "parents send us the best children they have," and it is no surprise that these children bring the best and the worst of their worlds with them into the schools. One school administrator describes it this way: "Every day, our kids bring their 'baggage' to school with them. This baggage is tough—it's just like the Samsonite luggage you see advertised on TV. In fact, this luggage is so tough, it is indestructible. We may want desperately to help these kids, but we cannot carry their luggage for them. Nor can we open it, or destroy it. All we can do is help them carry it."

The MAGIC ME program proceeds from the belief that urban middle school students share a great deal in common with the elderly. Both groups need help carrying their baggage. Children and the elderly have been marginalized by society, often left out of discussions regarding their own welfare. These groups lack a unified voice to speak on their behalf; they are searching for meaningful ways to become and remain involved within their communities.

At a time when many urban public schools are locked from the inside to protect the safety of their children, educators are looking beyond the walls of the classroom to help children find meaning and purpose in their educational lives. Community service and community service learning have captured a place at the center of the educational reform movement as more and more teachers open the doors of their classrooms to the communities beyond.

Community service learning is most successful when the individual chooses to serve. MAGIC ME's service learning model begins with an orientation which invites middle school students to choose work with elderly residents of nursing homes and with people with disabilities. Critical to the success of the program is the understanding that students choose to participate. Over 90% of the young people who complete the MAGIC ME

orientation choose to become participants in the program. For many of these children, this is the first time in their lives that they have been asked to become involved in their community. Just as the Peace Corps volunteers of the 1960s responded, when asked why they chose to become community service volunteers, children involved with community service learning in the 1990s are responding that they are involved "because we were asked. No one before has ever invited us to become involved."

Children, traditionally viewed as "consumers of educational services," (Hedin, 1989, p. 201) are becoming contributors. The served are becoming the servers. In the process, children are gaining the self-esteem necessary to develop their own voice and to advocate for themselves.

CSL AS A CURRICULAR TOOL

Today I had fun saying the timeline. It was so fun I want to do it again some other time. . . . I think I was a good introducer but I was a little bit afraid because I never have to speak in front of old people. (Journal entry by a 6th-grade girl who was known for her shyness, on the day she led a MAGIC ME activity for all 30 children and 30 elders.)

The introduction of community service to the school curriculum raises many questions. For example, what is the place of service and service learning in an already competitively tight school schedule? Should children miss English to stock a food pantry?

The approach to community service in schools is varied. Some educators view community service as the latest in a long list of "fix-it" reforms, designed to catch and hold students' attention while teaching "positive values." In many such cases, service is incorporated into the curriculum as a new course or after-school club. Enrollment in these courses and after-school clubs are typically homogeneous groupings of self-selected students who are likely to have been involved in some form of community service on their own, prior to their involvement in the new course or club. By creating independent courses with the primary purpose of introducing students to community service, students learn that community service is an end unto itself. While students may benefit from such opportunities, this approach to service results in opportunities missed. "The current movement to establish community service as a new Carnegie unit or extracurricular activity brings with it a set of problems that may keep service programs from fulfilling their greatest potential—a pathway to knowledge and academic growth. To pigeonhole service as an extracurricular activity used exclusively to improve the values of young people is almost surely to condemn it to a short life" (Hedin, 1989, pp. 202–203).

One example of the use of community service as an extracurricular program is an after-school community service club which provides service for a different community agency each month. While the service completed is important and necessary, the students have no opportunity to develop long-term relationships. They feel no particular commitment to any one agency and after six months begin to ask why they are performing the service. The lack of opportunity to develop meaningful relationships over time leads to a sense of being "used." In addition, the absence of reflection and curricular cross-over leads students to view their service as an end to itself. Without an understanding of the place of service in the broader context of their daily lives, students view the performance of service as "something nice to do for a while" and are less likely to choose to be involved with community service later in life.

A different approach to service in schools sees community involvement as a curricular tool, a means to an end. The most educationally successful community service learning projects use service as a curricular tool, as a means to an end, rather than as a means to itself. In these cases community service becomes a tool to help students make their learning real, to bridge the gap between theory and reality and to help integrate school learning into useful understanding for life. One teacher in the Cambridge Public Schools travels once each month with her 6th-grade class to a local nursing home. Students spend a good deal of time during the preceding month developing a plan and creating materials for their visit. English period is devoted to writing autobiographies and reading biographies of famous "old" people. The unit culminates with the students writing the biographies of their elderly partners.

Where community service learning is used as a curricular resource, students find connections between all aspects of their learning. Elementary school students learn math by calculating the numbers of cans stacked in rows at a local food pantry; middle school students improve their writing skills by serving as pen pals to sick children in a nearby hospital; high school students sharpen their critical thinking skills and learn about the workings of government by working with homeless women and children to develop local policies on housing and homelessness.

EQUITY THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE

My favorite thing in MAGIC ME was meeting the elderly and seeing the smiles on their faces. I also like getting to know my classmates better. The biggest thing I learned is that you should give people a chance and don't judge them by what they look like. (Journal entry, MAGIC ME/Boston participant)

Over and over again, community service learning has proven to be an equalizer in the classroom. For children who are used to being served, community service provides an opportunity to experience a sense of being needed, of being able to play an important and meaningful role in their community. For those who feel burdened as servers, who, despite their age, carry a great deal of responsibility, community service learning allows for the experience of two-way service.

The MAGIC ME program is a model of community service which brings together the young and the old for mutual support. MAGIC ME/Boston works to increase self esteem and academic motivation in children ages 11 to 14 through their participation in long-term community service to the elderly in nursing homes and to people with disabilities. It is a model which recognizes the need not only for regular, long-term meaningful service in the lives of the forgotten, but also the need for reflection to maximize learning.

The following are a few examples of community service learning through the MAGIC ME program which illustrate the power and importance of two-way service learning:

José is a small, thin child. He comes from a strictly religious household in which a great deal is decided for him. In school he is teased and taunted about his size. He has very few friends his own age and says that he hates to write. At the conclusion of his first visit to an elderly drop-in center, José hugs and kisses his new "friends" good-bye, promising to return the next week. During the second visit José volunteers to introduce the day's activity to the 30 children and 30 elders present. By the fourth visit, José is the unofficial mascot of the MAGIC ME program, organizing activities, passing out materials, and assisting classmates who are struggling to understand or communicate with their new elderly partners. In addition, José keeps a journal, documenting his thoughts and feelings on each weekly activity.

A MAGIC ME Group Leader reads and responds to José's journal each week, maintaining an ongoing dialogue about his experience with the elders. When the principal of José's school visits the program site she is amazed to find José leading activities. She quietly pulls a Group Leader aside and whispers that José is not a leader in school. The Group Leader replies that he is certainly a leader in MAGIC ME.

Diana is clearly a "ringleader" in the class. She is outspoken and tough in both spoken and body language. She is challenging to and demanding of her teachers. She is extremely bright and street-smart. Diana is responsible for a great deal at home. She cares for her siblings and has innumerable house chores. Initially, Diana wasn't sure that she wanted to visit elderly people.

On her first visit to the drop-in center Diana connected with Lucinda—a crotchety old woman who insists on sitting apart from the rest of the elderly clients. Lucinda is a chain smoker and coughs incessantly. She regularly uses foul language in the presence of the children and calls herself "Troublemaker."

On the fourth visit the children are asked to make one wish for their partners—Diana wishes that Lucinda would stop smoking. She even attempts to get Lucinda to promise to stop smoking. On the sixth visit Diana asks Lucinda to participate in a group activity in which she must leave her chair—something she has, to date, been unwilling to do. After a second request Lucinda leaves the comfort of her corner to join Diana in the center of the room, making it clear that she is doing so only because Diana asked it of her. At the end of the day Lucinda thanks Diana for coming and hugs her. Diana returns to school beaming. She is chatty and upbeat and "nice" to her classmates. Her teachers hardly recognize her.

Bobby is a fighter. His days are defined by the number of fights in which he has engaged. He says that he must fight because his brothers and cousins fight. He must fight to keep up and he must fight to secure his turf. Before visiting the nursing home Bobby asks whether he will have an opportunity to meet anyone who is blind. On his first day he is introduced to Mary, an extremely frail, wheelchair-bound woman in her 90s who is blind. Mary's eyes are covered by a piece of fabric wrapped around her head. Bobby, who has fought with every child in his group on the way to the nursing home, reaches out his hands to shake with Mary. She reaches back and they touch. From that moment on the two are inseparable.

Bobby insists on returning Mary to her room at the end of the visit. He carefully places one hand on Mary's shoulder to let her know he is there. She holds his hand and calls out to anyone listening in the halls that Bobby is her new friend and that he has come to visit her. On his fifth visit Bobby learns that Mary once played the piano. Not seeing any barriers he asks Mary to play for him. Staff at the nursing home where Mary has lived for many years are amazed to learn that Mary plays the piano. They had no idea. Mary gives a beautiful concert for Bobby and his friends in MAGIC ME.

In the eyes of their elderly partners, José, Diana, and Bobby are achievers. They are people who make things happen. Through the performance of provocative, meaningful, long-term service, these children have an opportunity to develop and demonstrate skill and, more importantly, to experience success. José, Diana and Bobby struggle to achieve in school. They have met with failure so often that by the 6th grade they have all but

given up. For these children, and others like them, the opportunity to experience success beyond the classroom walls is critical not only to improving their self-esteem but also to helping them to become lifelong learners.

A well-designed service learning curriculum builds in opportunities for success. Long-term service provides time for the development of meaningful relationships. Regular guided reflection and on-going journal writing allow students to internalize their learning and to integrate that learning into their daily lives. Collectively, these program elements allow learners to gain critical thinking skills, to increase self-esteem and to develop decision-making skills. Most importantly, a good community service learning program allows learners to acquire these skills at their own pace and depending on their needs.

Reaching children at their own levels is both time and staff intensive. Many schools find it difficult to provide the staff time necessary to create a sound service learning curriculum. MAGIC ME/Boston has developed a unique and creative staffing model in which college undergraduate and graduate students serve as Group Leaders. MAGIC ME/Boston provides training as well as supervision and internship credit for university students from throughout the Greater Boston area. In addition to gaining practical work experience, college interns enable MAGIC ME to make the most efficient use of limited financial resources while at the same time providing positive role models for Boston area "at risk" youth. For many of these young people, it is their first real contact with a college student. In addition, it is hoped that through their experience working as community service learning leaders MAGIC ME/Boston Group Leaders will remain committed and choose to be involved in service learning throughout their adult lives.

MAGIC ME: A MODEL CSL PROGRAM

Founded in Baltimore in 1980, MAGIC ME has rapidly grown from a project serving 20 children in a handful of schools to an international model for intergenerational service learning. It is a model which recognizes the need not only for regular, long-term meaningful service in the lives of the forgotten, but also the need for reflection to maximize learning. MAGIC ME is a program with a history of success in communities as diverse as Baltimore and Kenesaw, Nebraska; Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, and Flint, Michigan. Recently MAGIC ME has become a resource for schools, for youth serving community agencies and for nursing homes in Massachusetts. In November 1991, MAGIC ME became a curricular resource for the children and elders of Greater Boston.

MAGIC ME recognizes the importance of long-term, provocative community service. Children and elderly entering the program make a commitment to participate for three consecutive years. Entering sixth grade students remain involved, serving the same elderly partner at the same facility, throughout the duration of their middle school experience.

The MAGIC ME program consists of the following components:

- *Service.* Each week students visit a nursing home or other elder care facility where they develop personal relationships with a client through participation in experientially based educational projects and recreational games. Activities include, but are not limited to, oral history projects, exploration of family trees, video and photographic documentaries, music and visual arts projects, read-a-loud programs and physical fitness exercises.
- *Reflection & Service Learning.* Students keep journals which are collected weekly by group leaders who read and respond in writing to the students. Assigned journal topics assist in focusing the students on learning connected with their weekly service. Once each month students participate in a formal reflection session guided by MAGIC ME group leaders. The purpose is to provide an opportunity for students to discuss the experiences of working with their elderly partners and to find meaningful ways to integrate those experiences into their daily lives. Reflection sessions include brainstorming, journal writing, role playing, and trust building and values clarification exercises.
- *Life Skills Curriculum.* In addition to the monthly reflection sessions students are engaged in a three-year life skills curriculum which includes, but is not limited to, workshops in communication skills, mediation and conflict resolution, and introductory career exploration. Over time students identify MAGIC ME as a safe and comfortable environment in which to explore new ideas and to take on new challenges. For adolescents at risk, an environment of this kind can provide the most meaningful atmosphere for creative thinking and positive personal development.
- *Community Service Leadership Training Initiative.* Working collaboratively with the Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center, MAGIC ME/Boston has designed a full-day leadership training institute for youth participants. The institute is designed to expose children to initiative games, team building, critical thinking exercises and a ropes course. The Leadership Training Initiative includes a curriculum review and design workshop which provides an opportunity for youth participants to work collaboratively across grade levels, to share resources and to develop new, innovative, student-created program curricula for the coming semester.

THE CHALLENGE

I think the elders expect us to treat them like they're grown up—to be mature and have respect for them. And just to sit down and have a good time—to talk. I think I'm getting their

friendship—just to sit down and talk is better than any material things. (Journal entry, MAGIC ME/Boston participant)

Old people, people with memories, people in wheelchairs. . . . If I could do anything with an old person, I would go back in time to see their past and family. . . . People aren't useless, no matter how old they are. (Journal entry, MAGIC ME/Boston participant)

An invitation to participate in community service is a uniquely challenging opportunity. It is an opportunity to be exposed to new ideas, to develop and implement new theories and to receive immediate feedback. It is, at its core, an opportunity for children to succeed. All children can learn and all children can be successful service learners. Our challenge as educators is to find ways to help

students integrate the service experience into their every day lives and to provide service experiences which will last a lifetime.

REFERENCE

Hedin, Diane P. (1989). The power of community service, in caring for America's children. *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 37 (2), ed. F. J. Macchiarola and A. Gartner.

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