

JROTC Service Learning Summary 2004

I participated in the JROTC/RI Developmental Disabilities service-learning project for two school years. In the first year, it was a start-up project, and in the second year, I mentored another student at the same site I had gone before.

Every Monday morning we would go to the pool and work with small children who are in a local Early Intervention Program. We were supervised by Chris and Jen, the speech therapist and physical therapist that ran the group. Our activities included fine and gross motor skill “play”, socialization and some language skills.

Some of the children in the group had autism, a condition I knew a little about because I have an adult cousin who is very special to me, who has autism. The dictionary definition of autism is “engrossment in abnormal mental activity, as hallucinations or fantasies, together with withdrawal from external reality”. But autism is more than just a definition; autism is a way of life for some people. People with autism can have many special qualities and skills – for instance, my cousin can remember almost every song he has ever heard!

People think that having a disability doesn't mean living an ordinary life, but that is untrue. People with disabilities can live just like anyone else. It's up to the individual to decide how they will live. My perception of people has not changed as a result of my service learning, but I now have the experience of working with children (with autism), so I now know it from a different angle, one I had not known before. Through this project, I understand human interaction more than I did before, and I have more understanding about developmental disability.

Two academic areas I have gained knowledge and skill in are Literacy and Civics. In the Literacy area, I have learned to document things in a way to present to other people, recording my findings and thoughts in an organized way. The portfolio helped me with this. In the Civics area, I had been a disabilities advocate before, because it was personal for me. Now I have been paying attention to politics, and have learned about the New Freedom Initiative and Special Olympics, which I assisted with at URI in June.

A long-term result of high school students experiencing learning through service to others is that high school students will be able to experience life from a learning perspective. When you do service learning, you learn something, but you are also teaching something; you are taking and giving back as well.

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with Kathleen Samways, Service Learning Coordinator