

A Servant's Heart: Choosing to Serve

From a very young age, I found that some of the most valuable mentors can come from unexpected places. I have been fortunate enough to have countless adults in my life who have been willing to invest their time and talents to help me become a better person. Whether it was one of my scoutmasters, my pastor, or a family member, I have received an immeasurable amount of life-changing advice. Some of my most transformative guidance, however, has come from members of group homes for people with mental and developmental disabilities.

I personally understand the hardships that people who struggle with mental disabilities must endure, having a sister with mental illness myself. Life is more difficult for them than most believe. Many are ostracized and even feared by their own neighbors.

Since I was seven years old, my family and I would volunteer with a church ministry called Friends Being Friends that provides opportunities for group home residents with mental and developmental disabilities to socialize in the community and overcome stigma. Over the years, I have developed friendships with many group home residents and even have seen some blossom from shy and nervous to much more confident individuals, due in part to this increased social interaction.

One of our community activities was taking members on trips to the bowling alley. I remember that for a long time, one resident sat alone in the corner of the snack bar and would not even make eye contact with anyone. For months, there was little change in his behavior, but I began sitting nearby to give him company. Eventually, he became more comfortable with the group and began to bowl and even speak with others. Years later, every time I see him in town

he stops me to ask how I am and tell me about his new favorite cowboy movies. I consider him to be a significant mentor, as he taught me that sometimes the best way to be a friend is to not try to change people but give them the security and space to grow as they feel comfortable.

Having an active role as a volunteer in this ministry for several years gave me the confidence to step up and lead it along with my family in 2012 after the previous coordinator stepped down and nobody took his place. Even though I was only 12 when I took over as coordinator, the members of the group homes have always been gracious and understanding when things don't go exactly as planned. They have taught me that you do not have to have all the answers or be perfect to be a good leader.

There are different kinds of leaders; some prefer to be loud and authoritative, while others prefer to lead quietly from behind. Working with the Friends Being Friends group has undoubtedly shaped my personal leadership style through years of practice. I have been able to apply this leadership style in several other service activities. For example, I worked closely with younger scouts during my Eagle Scout project to effectively teach them how to perform their tasks as a team. My project was to build a gazebo for one of the group homes in Purcellville to provide a safe place for the residents to congregate away from the traffic on Main Street.

One scout in particular was very timid about using tools. After talking with him away from the others, I learned that he was afraid he would be embarrassed if he made a mistake. So, I worked with him to give him confidence in his new skills, and I told him that it's okay to make mistakes, because that is how we learn. The scout became one of the best workers on the team, and I hope that I was able to teach him a valuable life lesson, just as other older scouts taught me when I was a new scout.

Leading by example also came into play during my mission trip to indigenous communities in Guatemala. Although I did not speak their language, and they were not able to speak English, we worked together to feed hungry children and teach vacation Bible school. I learned through children living in poverty that actions speak louder than words, and that having material possessions--or even running water--does not create happiness and joy. I experienced true joy by simply playing jump rope with little children in the street. Many did not have shoes, but in that moment, we were able to create happiness together with an old rope and mutual respect.

Through all of these experiences, I've learned that mentors come from all socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities and ages--and each day is an opportunity to be mentored and to pay it forward.

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