



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Community Service”

by Jack Cohen

October 2, 2010

I think I was 6 years old when I had my first experience with community service. My sister, Abigail, was in the City Congregation bar and bat mitzvah program and I tagged along to help with some of her projects. They included participating in the annual AIDS Walk through Central Park and, through the Dorot organization, delivering a Thanksgiving meal to a senior citizen on the Upper West Side.

That same year, or maybe the next, I helped people in my neighborhood clean up an old and unused cobblestone carriage road called Holland Street, which is near my house in Jersey City. Every year, neighborhood residents of all ages gather to collect trash, weed between the stones, and plant bulbs along the sides.

For a long-term community project, I helped out at the Grace Church breakfast program in Jersey City. I chose Grace Church because I believe that hunger is an important issue and also because my sister, Abigail, did it and had recommended it to me.

On my first Saturday of volunteering at Grace Church, Mom and I got up going at about 6:30 in the morning. On the drive there, I thought I would be the only person there who didn't have experience with soup kitchens. It was intimidating to think that I'd be surrounded by a bunch of iconic heroes, like the people in those commercials who spend hours at a time cleaning birds that have been caught in oil spills.

I thought they would scoff at me for being just a kid who could only peel potatoes and open cans. Would they lose patience with me if I didn't pull my weight with the rest of them? Mom's advice was "be helpful but don't get in their way" and not to worry because all hands would be welcome. In fact, the people there were very nice and were open to suggestion because they were making it up as they went along, too. Volunteering Saturdays at Grace Church was a lot of fun. I enjoyed helping out, and I even made a few friends.

On that first day, I didn't know what to do, but within seconds of my arrival, Nick, the manager of the program, put me to work locating the napkin bin. After that, I filled juice cups with Sue, who asked me why I was there. We talked about how we'd each come to volunteer. She was friendly and welcoming, and made me feel part of the group right away.

Pouring the juice, I felt everybody was watching me, and that they would get impatient and start yelling at me, but then one of the people who'd come to eat breakfast said "thank you" and I didn't feel stressed anymore. I felt like people were appreciating what I was doing.

The food that day was corned-beef hash, grits, scrambled eggs, toast, peanut butter and jelly, apple juice, sausage, and coffee. I washed dishes from the day before, and got to use the movable power sprayer – very cool to a gadget guy like me. Once most of the breakfasters had left, the volunteers started putting away tables and chairs, but many of the breakfasters who were still there helped. A lot of them also stopped by the kitchen to say thanks. Those words made me feel really good. But even if I hadn't heard those words, I still would have felt good because I knew that I had helped.

Eventually, I got to do some cooking at Grace Church -- scrambled eggs -- but I also learned that the volunteers think of the time they donate as an enjoyable thing to do. It's not just something to do out of guilt or obligation to give back to the community. I found that the people who come to help, work at making the experience fun and enjoyable for all -- they stick to a schedule but aren't overbearing or strict or rushing to get the tasks done. I also learned that working under time constraints is easier if you enjoy what you are doing.

I recommend that everyone contribute some time to charity – there are so many and all can use your help. It is a humbling and eye-opening experience because it gives you some of the perspective of the people they're aiding. What I got out of my community service was a very good feeling deep inside. I also enjoyed meeting a lot of very interesting people.

In keeping with the tradition of the City Congregation, each student gives a portion of his bar mitzvah money to certain charities that they feel connected to. I have chosen to donate a portion of my bar mitzvah money to Heifer International and the Fresh Air Fund.

Heifer International is an organization that provides livestock to farmers in underdeveloped countries to breed and produce more chickens, goats, cattle and sheep for themselves and their fellow farmers. I believe hunger is a huge issue, and when I read about the work Heifer International does, I was reminded of the Chinese proverb: give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. To me, a program devoted to carrying out this simple idea on a big scale is a really innovative idea.

I am also donating a portion of my bar mitzvah money to a cause that's close to my heart -- the Fresh Air Fund. It's a charity that places underprivileged kids from New York City, most of whom have experienced only an urban setting, into summer camps outside the city. The summer camp I went to in Vermont changed my life, and I hope to help kids less fortunate than myself experience those same lessons for themselves.