MLK Day of Service

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“Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?”

– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Palisades High School in Kintnersville, Pennsylvania, is a rather homogeneous community of learners. There is little diversity, and students and school administration are resistant to change. In addition, it is an extremely rural community. There is no town center or public transportation, and students do not have easy access to cultural events, institutions, or non-profit organizations that would benefit from community service. These factors greatly affect the school climate. Many students do not readily embrace outreach to others, or take the opportunity to engage in meaningful service activities outside of the occasional National Honor Society project. Students may have a social conscience, but there have historically been few options for meaningful activism at Palisades. However, there are many organizations spread throughout the county that are engaged in extremely important work, and need volunteers to help carry out their missions. Collaborating with them requires a great deal of planning, organization, and commitment. The Martin Luther King Day of Service project which I implemented in January 2011 addressed not only the needs for Palisades students to reach outside their rolling farmlands and wooded hillsides to others in need, it also provided a much needed service to the Bucks County Housing Group, an organization that supports 13 housing shelters and serves thousands of homeless children and families throughout the county.

I have always known that I wanted to initiate the celebration of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service at Palisades High School. I spent my elementary school years at United Friends School, where Martin Luther King Day was a school-wide event. We dedicated every year to others in need, whether we were cleaning out refrigerators, painting barns, or reading stories to senior citizens in retirement communities. I was both surprised and disappointed when I arrived at public school in sixth grade and realized that the Martin Luther King Day of Service was not an integral part of the school community. I continued to return to my former school to assist them with their Day of Service work between sixth grade and my sophomore year of high school, all the while contemplating my own Day of Service event. I decided then that before I graduated from high school I would initiate the Day of Service, and establish it firmly enough that it would continue after I graduated.

I began formalizing my plans for the Martin Luther King Day of Service during the Summer@Brown Leadership Institute. I knew that my school needed a structured outlet for community service and awareness, and also knew the national holiday would provide an excellent format for meeting this need.
I contacted mentors at my school to approve my project, and then set to work. When I returned from Brown, I learned that my high school schedule was in a state of disarray, and that I could not schedule all the classes I initially requested. As a result, I enrolled in the Seminar III class at my school, which focuses on providing time for students to complete targeted research projects. I conferred with the seminar teacher, and she agreed that the class would provide me with some time to coordinate the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service Project. I used time in class to work on the project, make phone calls, photocopy papers, and develop ideas for service work. The class also provided me with time during the school day to meet with the principal about administrative aspects of the project. In addition, during the class I developed and completed a school-wide Diversity and Service Survey. I was interested in learning about the service commitments of every student and what I could do to expand their options for service and exposure to diversity. Through the survey, I learned that only 57% of students at Palisades High School participate in community service, and that 13% of students feel uncomfortable working with students from different backgrounds. I decided that my Martin Luther King project could address these issues and possibly implement significant change.

My initial vision for the Day of Service project involved many Palisades students travelling in small groups to organizations in need, but this proved to be logistically impossible. Because of the rural location of our school, these area organizations are, at best, 45 minutes away. In addition, the principal informed me of several parameters that would restrict individual student travel, adult clearances, and district supervision requirements. I realized that whatever we did, we would need to work in a large group, dedicating our service day to one single organization. I spent about two months contacting area organizations, offering a group of 40 to 50 high school students ready and willing to lend a hand. I assured organization representatives that we could paint walls, clean closets, and stuff envelopes. I didn’t realize how organizations would react to an offer of teenage assistance – I believe most of them rejected my offer out of fear! Why would anyone in their right mind want to deal with that many teenagers for 8 hours in a single day?

Once again, my project evolved. I realized I needed to find a location in which to gather all the students, and then design a service project to be delivered to an area organization in need. I decided upon the Bucks County Housing Group immediately. I have been involved in personal service with that organization in the past, so was aware of the breadth of their need and had contacts so could easily collaborate with them to help meet those needs. The specific activities for the day were developed after a conversation with one of the Bucks County Housing Group Coordinators, Kate Bianchini. She was instrumental in informing me about which of my ideas would actually be practical for the shelters and food pantries. I also decided to collaborate with Neighborhood First, an organization in the lower part of our county that works with at-risk youth. I thought that bringing Palisades students together with Neighborhood First students would add an invaluable diversity component to the project. I contacted Keevon Johnson, a Neighborhood First counselor, and he was extremely excited about the project. Finally, the search for a site to gather the students for the day began. I am a Student Docent and a Junior Volunteer at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, about halfway between both Palisades High School and Neighborhood First. I knew that their expansive event space would be the perfect place to gather the students, and also know they are dedicated to outreach and diversity programming as part
of their mission. The CEO of the museum knows me personally because of my volunteerism there over the last several years, so when I approached him about my proposal he agreed to open the museum on a day when it is typically closed and pay a front desk staff person to be there for the day in case of a security emergency. I contacted the bus company that operates our school district buses and they generously donated a bus and driver for the day. I also applied for and received an Upper Bucks County Chamber of Commerce Mini-Grant, which paid for most of the supplies. In addition, several private donors came forth with contributions in support of the project.

I spent a few weeks finalizing plans for specific projects, making lists, running errands, and preparing materials. I also ordered 50 t-shirts from the Martin Luther King Day of Service website. On Sunday, January 16, I spent the day at the Michener Museum setting up workstations, preparing cleaning stations, assembling cardboard boxes, and learning how to operate the sound and media system. I also needed to collect my thoughts.

The Day of Service arrived on January 17. Palisades and Neighborhood First students arrived at the museum at nine in the morning. We engaged in the “How the Wind Blows” game that I learned over the summer at Brown. We watched the entire “I Have a Dream” speech, which most of the Palisades students said they had never seen, and had a conversation about the Civil Rights movement, where it stands today, and how Dr. King’s work continues to impact our lives. We listened to a presentation and engaged in a discussion about the issues of homelessness in our county. Again, many students were not aware of the vastness of this problem in our region. The remainder of the day was spent engaged in service work.

Throughout the day, students worked in pairs with the stipulation that the members of each pair did not know each other. The pairs began by creating no-sew fleece blankets. This turned out to be an excellent get-to-know-you activity because the students needed to overcome a lot of obstacles as a team. The pairs were then put into groups of eight, and within these groups they played the picnic name game to continue to open up dialogue and conversation. I then introduced the remaining projects, and students went from station to station in 45-minute time blocks to complete the work that needed to be done. We made no-bake cookies out of melted chocolate, butterscotch, chow mein noodles, peanuts, marshmallows, and cereal. We froze them outside in the fifteen-degree weather before packing them in tins. We made chocolate covered pretzels, and packed them in Ziploc bags for school lunches. We attached dated stickers to the food products, so that people in the shelters would know to eat them before they expired. The next station included the creation of hand-painted t-shirts. The museum supplied the shirts, and students used acrylic paints to decorate them with images and messages that were fun and playful, and often filled with hope. We made Earth Day coloring books by collating coloring pages I downloaded from the Internet, creating covers, and stapling the books together. We assembled craft and activity kits; essentially Ziploc bags filled with paper, envelopes, stickers, a box of crayons, pencils, erasers, and a glue stick. At this station, students also made personalized cards to be given to homeless children. At the final station, students wrote political action letters to local and state representatives about the problems of homelessness and their concerns for action. Halfway through the
day, we ate a delicious (and donated) pizza lunch along with several batches of cookies, bags of apples, and hundreds of Hershey’s kisses. All in all, we made 50 fleece blankets, collated 50 coloring books, assembled 200 craft and activity kits, baked 2000 cookies, packed 200 lunch snack packs, hand designed 50 t-shirts, and wrote 50 letters to local representatives in support of homeless outreach throughout Bucks County. At the end of the day, all the goods were packed in boxes, loaded on the school bus, and delivered to the Bucks County food pantry and housing shelter that was closest to the museum. The students had the opportunity to see their work “land” at its final destination, to meet shelter staff, and to unpack their work into the food pantry and shelter offices. It is clear that my Martin Luther King Day of Service incorporated education, direct action, and political action strategies to address the service needs and need for diversity outreach of Palisades High School and Neighborhood First students, and to address the needs of the homeless in Bucks County.

I planned and executed the project myself, but I received feedback and suggestions from several adult mentors. It was essential at the outset to have the support of my school principal, Mr. Richard Heffernan, for project approval and to communicate the policy ramifications and school district requirements of organizing the day. Mrs. Carol Harder was my Seminar III teacher, my high school contact, and faculty advisor for the project. I learned a lot from Neighborhood First counselor Keevon Johnson, whose laid back approach to the event rubbed off on me and helped get me through the day. I was surprised by the support of the Director of Transportation of the school district, who was so enthusiastic about my project that he donated transportation for the day (this saved about $900). My mother, Ruth Anderson, also assisted me logistically as it is very hard to execute a project of this magnitude without a driver’s license! In addition, every organization I collaborated with provided me with the opportunity to meet and get to know adult mentors who were in support of my efforts. Cooperation and support from the staff at Neighborhood First, the Bucks County Housing Group, and the Michener Museum were essential to the positive outcome of the project. As my plans were unfolding, I also had the opportunity to build connections with other organizations, namely the United Way, the KIPP Charter Schools in Philadelphia, and the local chapters of Soroptimist International, all of whom may be involved in the Day of Service in the future. Above all, the students were amazing. They were enthusiastic, supportive, engaging, and fun all day long. They interacted successfully with each other, and came to learn about each other’s communities, interests, and lifestyles more deeply. They also worked very hard. Many are eager to help out on the Day of Service 2012, and more importantly there are students who are interested in helping me coordinate the project next year. I have pinpointed two underclassmen who are eager to assume leadership responsibilities with me next year and assist with the organizational aspects of the day. These students are willing to continue the project after I graduate.

A Neighborhood First Board Member who stopped in to help out during the event called the local newspaper and informed them about what was happening at the museum. A reporter came to the museum to write about the Day of Service initiative. I did not fully appreciate the scale of my project until a reporter began interviewing me about it. I was moved by the fact that he was interested in a project that I had spent half of the school year planning and organizing and that I have set as a goal since I was in sixth grade. I knew that for me, personally, the day was extremely significant. It wasn’t until I
started discussing the project with him that I realized the impact of what we were actually accomplishing.

I had an amazing time working on this Martin Luther King Day of Service project. I was deeply inspired by Dr. King’s life as a child, and the project allowed me to rekindle my feelings, connect more deeply with his values and spirit, and to live out my personal dream. I learned that I am most comfortable when things are organized well in advance, that I do not like working under pressure, but I am capable of doing so. I learned that I am definitely a Northern leader, one who is decisive and values action. I know that I prefer to do things myself, and that turned out to be a valuable lesson for me. I realize now that doing things myself gives me a strong feeling of accomplishment and fulfillment, but that sharing the doing with others also builds the success and longevity of a goal. Through the project, I built on my skills of collaboration and communication. The first phone call I had to make for this project left me fraught with anxiety and uncertainty, but I quickly overcame my fears. I learned that some aspects of large-scale projects need to be carefully planned, and that other aspects can be quite successful if they unfold organically. I learned that humor is an important part of any community project. I also learned that there are a lot of people in my community who want to help; they simply need leadership and a meaningful project in order to become involved. I learned about the importance of developing relationships throughout one’s life, as you never know when those relationships may prove crucial to a project’s success. I also learned through writing about this project for grant and award applications that I need to improve upon my ability to talk about my accomplishments and myself. I came closer to understanding the meaning and value of effective leadership. Most importantly, I have realized that I am most fulfilled when I am helping others. My actions can make a difference in the lives of others.

I believe that every person who was in attendance at the Martin Luther King Day of Service, from students to chaperones and reporters to observers, felt engaged and inspired by their ability to make a difference. One student told me that the most important thing that she took home from the Day of Service was an awareness that homelessness is an issue in Bucks County and that she can do something about it. Another student said that the best part of the day for him was the realization that people were actually going to benefit from things that he directly contributed to making. One student from Neighborhood First told me that the biggest thing that she would take away from the project was a heightened sense of appreciation. My project mentor was teary eyed at the end of the day. “This is one of those days that are rare in my thirty years of teaching. I saw the spirit of young people in action, and watched a true leader unfold before my very eyes. The energy and passion is immeasurable. This day will stay with me long after I retire.” A parent phoned me after the Day of Service event to share with me how deeply her daughter was moved by the experience. The staff members of both the Michener Art Museum and my high school have expressed their continued interest in the project, which means that organizing it next year will be an easier task. I was also invited to present my project at an evening event for a local women’s organization. Lastly, The Martin Luther King Day event kindled interest from both groups of students and their chaperones to meet more frequently in order to discuss issues and concerns that affect both student populations. I have recently received additional grant funding from a local foundation, which will help continue the collaboration between the Palisades and Neighborhood First students. Students will be meeting periodically for bagels or pancakes in what will become an
informal but meaningful exchange of ideas. I am delighted that a local community foundation recognizes the amazing potential in this newly formed student partnership. In addition, the staff at the Housing Group was also moved by our work, and hundreds of homeless families in Bucks County will benefit from the fruits of our labors. I can imagine young children arriving at area shelters, reading the letters we wrote them, putting on hand made t-shirts, cuddling up in their very own blankets, and drifting off to sleep. This is a big part of what the day was all about.

The Symposium for Social Action at Brown University in November was instrumental in continuing the momentum for my project and helping me refocus my goals. I was working against a rapidly approaching deadline, January 17, so needed the Symposium to keep me inspired and recharge my proverbial batteries. The Symposium encouraged me to expand the scope of my project and to build transitioning into the work that needed to be completed. I was encouraged to organize year-round events and to build upon school-wide service projects throughout the year. I was also made to consider building the Day of Service more deeply into the life of my high school. After returning from the Symposium, I met with the Palisades Student Government to propose adding a Community Service component to the board of officers. It was agreed that I will serve in this position for the next two years, helping the position take shape, and then the position will be an elected one, alongside the other traditional offices. One of the responsibilities of this office will be to maintain a web presence of service opportunities for students to access, and I will be working to develop this in the spring. I also provided all the students with a reference for ideas about expanding their personal service commitments in the area, and am aware that some of the students have already contacted these organizations to line up summer volunteer opportunities for themselves. Students are also hearing back from the politicians to whom they wrote, further reinforcing to them that their actions can have impact. These positive outcomes grew directly from what I learned at the Symposium. I am extremely grateful that Brown University provided me with the experiences, resources, support, and the confidence I needed to realize my action plan.

My ultimate goal is for the Palisades Day of Service project to expand from a small group of students this year to the entire student body in the future. I feel the Martin Luther King project can continue to inspire students in Upper and Lower Bucks County to embrace Dr. King’s spirit, and to expand the ideals of their personal commitment to service. I feel students must be provided with opportunities to recognize their power to make a difference, whether they are learning about an organization in need, developing an appreciation for diverse groups of people, working at a food bank, assisting the elderly, or simply stuffing envelopes. If I have changed the way one person thinks, or exposed one person to an idea or issue that challenges and engages them, or if through this project one student goes out into the community and begins a lifelong dedication to service, then I have accomplished a lot.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has inspired me since I first learned about his heroic life. While working on this event, I was most motivated by the genuine enthusiasm of the participants in my Day of Service project, the willingness of adult mentors to support my goals, and my firm belief in my ability to work
hard and make a difference. I was also inspired by Dr. King’s famous words: “Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve... You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”