

Personal Reflection Paper

In my Social Diversity class at Salt Lake Community College we were assigned a group service-learning project for a marginalized population. My group was assigned to sexual minorities. We choose to do our service hours at the Utah Pride Center where we met Megan Risbon our agency contact person. She made us feel welcome and although our class was being held at a time when they had little for us to she did not turn us away.

Our first few hours of service were nothing more than cleaning the bookshelves in their library. The library is located in the coffee shop beneath their office. While we cleaned we saw many people come and go and had a fairly pleasant time talking to each other. However, we felt that in order for us to do our project justice we needed to actually interact with people of that minority population. With that in mind, we postponed our project a little longer so that we could help out with a planned Thanksgiving Day meal.

Thanksgiving Day came and I showed up at the pride center at 9:45 am. I thought I was going to be early since they told me 10:00. The place however was already bustling with activity. Food was already being prepared and the center was almost ready to start serving meals. Everyone seemed happy and excited to be there. At 11:00 the food was ready and the volunteers were given the chance to eat before we started serving the public. Although we had not intended to eat there, because we felt the food was intended for other people, the Pride Center personnel made us feel welcome and insisted that we eat with them. They seemed sincerely thankful that we were there and wanted us to fully participate in the day's events.

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At 12:00 we started serving the public. Because we had so many volunteers, we took turns working in the serving line. When we were not serving food we got to socialize with the people who came to eat and hang out in a place where they felt safe and accepted. I, personally, was impressed by how genuinely friendly everybody was. Anyone who walked through the door was greeted and invited to sit, eat, and participate in the conversation. It was not forced, like some of the work Christmas Parties I have been to. It was just an easy place to be. During one of our conversation I asked an older couple why they choose to come to the Pride center on Thanksgiving. The answer was not what I expected. They had other options. They were invited and wanted at their extended families dinner. They could have done their own and invited people to their home. But, they felt a need to be there and be part of the support network for anyone who might show up and be in need of fellowship and acceptance. They wanted to be an example to the younger generation that the negative labels they have been hearing their whole lives were not true. They wanted people to know firsthand that it is possible to find love, be in a committed relationship and have fulfillment and joy. All the things that they are told, one way or another, are not likely to happen for them because of their sexual orientation.

This type of modeling became important early in the afternoon. At about 12:30 I noticed a young woman standing alone against the wall. She looked nervous, withdrawn, sad, and a little scared. My first thought was that she was just waiting for someone, so I left her alone. After several more minutes, I got the nerve up to ask her name and if she was looking for somebody. She told me she was not waiting for anyone. So, I asked her if I could get her a plate of food. She told me very politely "No thanks". I try not to be pushy, so I told her it was nice to

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meet her and if she changed her mind to let me know. A short time later I noticed her being approached by Megan and another one of the Pride Center personnel as well as this couple. In a very short time they were able to make this girl feel comfortable enough that soon she was eating and laughing with them at their table. Her countenance had completely changed. She looked relaxed and happy. When she came through my line I told her that I was happy that she had decided to eat with us. She laughed and said, "Well, they insisted". I smiled at her and told her I was glad to hear it.

As I reflected on my experience at The Utah Pride Center I was surprised to feel how grateful I was that a place like this existed. I appreciated so much that their trained and experience team were able to reach out and "insist" that the young woman standing against the wall felt wanted, accepted, acknowledged. With all the negative stuff that has been in the news lately about kids killing themselves due to bullying it seems even more important that there is a place where these kids can be embraced.