

May 2007

Tips for Teachers

ELMLE

What do your Summer Plans include? Fellow International Schools teacher **Derek Harwell** of Amsterdam shares some of his experiences as a volunteer in community service.

And in the end, the love you take, is equal to the love, you make
– The Beatles

As the end of the school year approaches, teachers often look forward to the uncomplicated, ease of summer. A much needed break to reflect from the year and look forward to the coming year. Summer break brings many opportunities as well. Becoming a volunteer for an important cause is one such opportunity afforded by the extra time summer offers. This tip for teachers will provide some links for service while I share some of my own experiences. I am sure many teachers have had great memories and learning experiences while in volunteer service. You should be encouraged to share those with colleagues and encourage others to experience and remember the overwhelming feelings brought by giving to others. Often the difference service makes in yourself excels the difference you can make.

While a high school student, I learned the importance of disconnecting from the school year by giving my time to volunteer service. As an adult, life becomes more complicated, demanding and time seems in short supply. However, in times when I have had volunteer opportunities, I found that service led not only to different relaxation but also to a humbling growth that renewed my strength and compassion as I entered a new school year positive, refreshed and enthusiastic.

During High School, I connected with several organizations that led me to discover the importance of the work of every individual. During 10th Grade year, I began a recycling program at my high school, which in 1981 was not as easy as it would seem now. Through this I became a volunteer with the Sierra Club and Greenpeace and later with the more radical group, Earth First. My early connections with environmental groups would lead me in many directions that I would never have encountered otherwise.

At 17 I left high school and began as a student at Virginia Tech to study politics. Through my Friends (Quaker) Meeting, I had learned more and more about the unrest and wars in Central American, and the role the United States played in the area. Eventually my concern grew and I connected with several groups providing service in the area – the Christic Institute, Witness for Peace and the Carolina Interfaith Taskforce for Central America (CITCA). Eventually I went to Nicaragua as a Witness for Peace with the task of living in Honduras border communities to help educate citizens but primarily serve as an obvious *Norteamericano* and prevent raids from US-backed Contras. Thankfully I was still young and very naive about the actual danger of this service; yet it taught me how important the action of one individual can be.

Several years later, I began my study to become a teacher. My interest in service continued. I reconnected with my interest in environmental work, which led me to also become involved with Native American issues. I worked with an offshoot organization backed by the Sierra Club trying to preserve a large geographical area in northern Quebec where the Cree people as well as a variety of wildlife lived. Hydro-Quebec and the secessionist government were trying to build a series of Hydro Electric dams on native Cree land. During the 1970's several dams were built; and while they did provide electricity to areas of Canada and the Northern USA, the environmental and social impact on the lives of the Cree was devastating. Until that time The Cree Nation of Chisabi had lived not that much differently from pre-European contact natives – a vastly diminishing way of life. In the end, we were able to cancel contracts in the Northeast United States and helped to prevent the impending doom to the culture and environment in the James Bay region of Quebec. My time spent living with the Cree changed the way I would view western ideals, my personal impact on our environment and the importance of always working towards important goals.

I remember as my first full year of teaching was approaching that first experience of summer vacation. However at the same time the states bordering the Mississippi and tributaries were experiencing a phenomenon known as the 100-year flood. Millions of people in the region were displaced from their homes and livelihoods. Several of my colleagues decided we had the time and felt the need to help. Three of us loaded trucks with donations and headed west. Upon arrival we were not prepared to find the devastation in front of us. Among the many stories of that summer, one stood out. We were this a elderly couple who had not been in their home since their early morning emergency departure. We escorted them to the ruin that was once home. We all wore protective clothing as we helped dig through what was once their life. Of all the treasures lost, Mrs. Miller wept at discovering her family cookbook, now caked in a toxic mud. Sharing this experience with my students the following school year, I was overwhelmed at their desire to collect recipes from their families and create a new cookbook for a woman they had not met. I realized then that our experiences not only touch us but those around us and engages that spirit which drives our will to help others. The year with that class began in that spirit and continued to drive much of our work that year.

As a teacher, these experiences helped me not only to realize the potential impact of the individual but also allowed me to experience something larger than myself - a humbling, enriching experience. I share these thoughts not to bring attention to my personal experiences in the past but to share them in the hope that they can help others reconnect to the rewarding experience that comes through giving one's time, self and expertise to a cause. To share in this giving with a host of others connects each of us to something greater.

Listed below are some links to organizations that help match skills to needs often on a large scale. There are numerous ways to give in every community and these local opportunities provide equal or greater experiences in each of our lives.

American Friends Service Committee (Quakers)

<http://www.afsc.org/>

Witness for Peace

<http://www.witnessforpeace.org/>

Working Holidays:

<http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/123go/descriptions-en.asp>

John Muir Trust and the Sierra Club and Greenpeace

<http://www.jmt.org>

<http://www.sierraclub.org/>

<http://www.greenpeace.org>

Would you like to share your own community service experiences or those of your students through Tips for Teachers? It's simple: email your story to the Big Tipper alan_heath@asl.org.

The European League for Middle Level Education reminds you that our annual January conference takes place next year in the romantic environment of Vienna, city of Mozart, Strauss, fine wine, and elegant architecture. Check out our website elmle.org to find out more! We hope to see you there.

While you're at it, consider writing for publication in our fine ELMLE journal, Bridge in the Middle. Again, the website will fill you in on the details. The magazine offers ELMLE writers the professional boost that publication can give to a teacher at any point in his or her career. We need your article by October 1. Questions? Email one of the ELMLE steering committee. Our names and contact details are available on the website.