

Petawa Service Project

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Bridget Mulcahy, a three time veteran of the Petawa Service project, says: “it has unquestionably improved my understanding of what compassion truly is, and has helped me out of my shell into the world of reality. I have acquired some unique traits from the people I served and

from the students with whom I worked. I have probably never been so proud of something that I have done. That was the reason why I returned to the Petawa Service Project for three summers.”

Petawa Service Project, which began in 1987, brings together 15 high school girls for each of the two one-week sessions. The goal: to encounter the ordinary human needs found in any American community and to take an active role in contributing to solve them. For many of the girls, they are exposed for the first time to service to the elderly, handicapped, and underprivileged outside their home life. They experience neighborhoods and people on a personal level that they may not encounter otherwise. The mixture of work, personal growth and fun have made the program a popular one. The evidence is a steadily growing number of applications each year.

Besides Wisconsin, in 2002, the participants came from Kentucky, Virginia, Illinois and Iowa.

Petawa Residence, in existence since 1959, is a student housing facility for young women in Milwaukee that challenges women of all ages to enrich society through their personal contribution. Petawa facilitates each one's growth, offering programs for cultural, spiritual, professional and educational development. The spiritual direction of activities at Petawa is entrusted to Opus Dei.

During the service project, the mornings are spent providing academic tutoring and character mentoring in a day camp for inner-city Hispanic children. The volunteers are paired up with one or more of the children in a casual setting that contributes to developing friendships with them. The volunteers search for ways to help

each child to grow academically and personally, according to each one's needs and possibilities. In addition to strengthening math and language skills, the children are offered a program of arts and crafts projects, and sports.

The afternoons of the service project are occupied with serving various community needs, such as helping at a local food pantry and visiting a rehabilitation nursing home. A show performed by the high school volunteers was the highlight of the visits: Katie and Julie Dillett played the violin, while Liz Magnor sang "Edelweiss" and "Shall we dance". A chorus sang several songs, and they all danced to a Frank Sinatra song, which of course, brought smiles from the older crowd. One of the women in the audience said "the best part of the show was watching the girls laugh hysterically when they got embarrassed, it reminded me of

those high school years when it takes very little to make you laugh. It is a wonderful medicine.” Since the performance was such a success, it was repeated the following day for the day-campers as a way to bid good-bye at the end of the session. We saw a few tears, exchanging of addresses and lots of hugs as the parents came to collect the campers.

Rest, fun and culture are also part of the agenda, taking advantage of the many outdoor opportunities Milwaukee offers in the summer, tubing at Lake Buelah, visiting the new Calatrava addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum, a stroll along the Riverwalk, a visit to the Hyatt’s moving dining room, and Petawa’s very own “elegant dinner”.

Opportunities for spiritual development are also available: the volunteers can pray at Mass daily for the people they will serve and can

spend time in prayer in the Residence chapel. Other components round out the experience: from classes on philosophy of the human person, with an explanation of the dignity of each person, to a very practical “how to” organize and take better advantage of high school by setting priorities and formulating goals.

The combination of fun, work, spiritual development and culture allows the volunteers to grow themselves. One of the high school girls was surprised to see the girl she tutored cry when the camp ended. She said “I had no idea I was able to have such an impact on someone just by my friendship and a few hours of helping out”.

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