

The Value of Community Service

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Since the beginning of this semester, the students at Prince Street Academy have been participating in an ongoing community service project through South Suburban Parks and Recreation. Every Tuesday, accompanied by their teachers, the group sets out for a park in Littleton wearing donated work gloves and t-shirts that identify them as South Suburban Parks and Recreation (SSPR) volunteers. Depending on the weather conditions, layers of warmer clothing often cover their work shirts, but to passersbys, it's obvious that the kids are hard at work maintaining the outdoor space.

The first time I visited the site of our community service project, I wasn't sure what to expect. So many of the excited Prince Street Academy volunteers had told stories about their work and seemingly impossible feats involved in the project, that I had begun to assume the tales were merely "fish-that-got-away" braggadocio. What I saw in the first two hours of the trip was overwhelming and humbling. In a few months, our Prince Street Academy volunteers had practically rebuilt the bank running along one side of a large lake. The shoreline where students had been working was eroding away gradually. Left unchecked, the erosion would have eventually taken out a well-used path around the lake, which divided the water from the neighborhood homes.

Our team, made up of young people and adults from Prince Street Academy and our fearless leader Susan, from the recreation district, had accomplished an incredible amount of work, both in and out of the water. Huge rocks had been carried and pieced together, like a puzzle, in the water along the banks. The rocks were secured by even larger logs, staked into the lake bottom with six-foot-long piece of steel rebar.

The makeshift banks were filled in with dirt, shovelled and transported by our team, and then covered with pallets containing grass seed. It was all protected temporarily by fencing. The public pathway extending around the lake had been completely cleared of overgrowth by the pruning shears of our group.

Perhaps even more important, the kids around me were excitedly competing for my attention. In fact, I don't think I had ever seen them so enthused about "education." They knew the names of birds, trees and plants. They could explain why they had engaged in specific work activities, and how each of those activities helped preserve the surrounding natural resources. Every single student, no matter how often they had fallen asleep at their desk in the classroom, was flushed with the pride of accomplishment – and wide awake. For many, this project constituted the first goal to which they had committed and followed-through to fruition. The visible products of their hours at work were all around us, and the results of their hard work indisputable. The power of the community service project as a whole was just as palpable.

Through the community service project, the kids from Prince Street Academy learned about teamwork, goal-setting, job skills, and the importance of giving back to their community. They obtained knowledge about conflict resolution, environmental resources, and the meaning of a "work ethic." One of the students participating in the project explained, "I have never liked school. The only way I can learn anything is when I'm moving and working too. I've learned the most from open space [the community service project]." Another participant put it like this: "Open space was great in every way. I learned a lot from Susan, and I feel really good about how hard we all worked and what we achieved."

I would like to recognize the hard work of the students and staff at Prince Street Academy, particularly teachers Nadine Gill and Ben Ottoson. We all extend our sincere gratitude to Susan Smith and South Suburban Parks and Recreation for their partnership with us. Thank you, Susan, for your unending patience, and the time you took to get to know each of us. You have been a teacher to all of us, and your lessons are invaluable.

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About Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network (ADMHN)

ADMHN is a private, nonprofit 501 © (3) corporation providing professional, comprehensive behavioral health care and substance abuse treatment primarily, but not exclusively, in Arapahoe and Douglas counties. We offer programs for adults, seniors, families, couples and children. These services include counseling, psychiatry, crisis services, case management, substance abuse treatment, victim services, an adult acute treatment unit, adult supported and residential housing, services to the criminal justice system, vocational and social rehabilitation, a day treatment therapeutic school and school-based services. Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network has an on-site pharmacy. We offer community education, wellness programs and a Speakers Bureau. Learn more at admhn.org.

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