

Giving Mrs. Jefferson a Voice: The Underwood Law Office Community Leadership

Scholarship Essay

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Spray, wipe, dry, repeat. The dining room table shines from what little winter sun falls through the window of the old, silent house in the outer suburbs of Washington, D.C. I look at the aged, crackled wood within the boards of the table with a concerned enough look on my face to cause the table's owner to ask me, "Is something wrong with it?"

"No," I reply with a smile, "I just don't think I will be able to mend these cracks. I can only pick up the dust around them."

"Oh, that's no problem. Those cracks have been around for a long time... probably longer than you!" Mrs. Jefferson¹ laughs a quiet giggle, as her lips open just a crack. She wears a lavender purple suit fit for a congress member, and she stands up so straight that you almost wouldn't believe she is 95 years old and about 5 feet tall.

"I've got to tell you, Mrs. Jefferson, yours is the most beautiful house I have helped renovate with Seabury." She answers with a proud, sort of up-side down smile.

"Well, I've lived here for almost 50 years, you know? My babies and their babies have grown up in this house... they've all moved away now." I notice Mrs. Jefferson follows me as I work around the house dusting windows, removing small stains from kitchen appliances, sweeping essentially spotless floors. As I spray, wipe, and dry each of her photo frames, she tells me a story about who is in the photo, the day it was taken, and why she put it in this room rather than that one.

I had helped renovate ten houses already this semester, all ten of which were more rundown than Mrs. Jefferson's. I signed up for Seabury Resources for Aging because, even though I had completed 361 high school volunteer hours, I never felt the direct impact of my efforts on my community. I packed letters at my middle school, interned for the State Attorney's

¹ Mrs. Jefferson's real name has been omitted for privacy purposes.

Office in Maryland, and did other small tasks helping teachers here or there; but my interaction with those in need was either short and impersonal or non-existent. When I entered the University of Maryland College Park, I told myself there had to be more meaningful ways to serve my local community other than working in a filing room. I was accepted for a volunteer position and started cleaning, landscaping, and rearranging furniture for elderly homeowners in D.C. who were no longer physically able to take care of their homes due to their age. I left every home smiling, especially if my knees or back were sore from reaching over to clean or lift things around the house. I considered soreness the sign of a job well done and finally felt a sense of satisfaction once the house looked brand new. Thus, you can understand why, when I stepped into Mrs. Jefferson's beautiful home and saw her standing so straight, I was a little more than confused. I was disappointed.

After a little over an hour, my volunteer group cannot find anything else to "fix up", so Mrs. Jefferson asks for the mirrors to be wiped down "real good" and for the floors to be swept "real nice". As we retrace our steps, Mrs. Jefferson chats with me from room to room. When she can't find any more tasks, she reluctantly says, "Well, I thank you for your help. The place needed some work." Although I find that hard to believe, we say it was our pleasure and tell her to have a nice day. As I gather my tools and walk towards the door, Mrs. Jefferson speaks directly to me in a hushed voice, "And I want to thank you for spending time with me today, Emily. No one has... listened to me... for a very long time."

Driving away, I begin to realize what service truly means. I had tried for years to find fulfillment as a public servant with organizations that would allow me to directly bring about some sort of visible change in society, whether that was helping to renovate a house with Seabury, cleaning up campus gardens with my Phi Alpha Delta pre-law fraternity, fundraising

for Her Justice with Empowering Women in Law UMD, etc. I never knew I would learn the real meaning of service by simply listening to a 95 year old lady talk about her life. My frustration subsides as I determine why Mrs. Jefferson had asked Seabury to renovate her home. She just needed someone to listen. Underrepresented groups- like the elderly- need to know that we care, that society listens to what they have to say about discriminatory practices- like ageism. There is a general, incorrect assumption that public service entails simply raising money for an underserved group, handing a nonprofit the funds, and telling those in need, "Here's financial aid, go help yourself." Instead, it is important that public servants like myself take a moment to stop and listen. We should not assume we know what is best for those less fortunate. Once I listened to Mrs. Jefferson, I realized what she needed was not a renovated home, per say. What she told me she needed was an opportunity to speak her experiences and struggles of old age and loneliness into existence so society could make changes. Therefore, I argue that service means making underserved groups aware of their voice. Service means telling marginalized communities, "Your voice matters, and I am here to listen."