

SOURCE Champion of the Month
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Dan Soffer

Johns Hopkins School of Medicine
MD Candidate. Class of 2020

“Time is precious and not all experiences may be worth someone’s while if it doesn’t match their goals or interests”

What do you do as your community engagement activity?

I volunteer at Commodore John Rogers and teach science to a group of 4 middle school Spanish-speaking “Newcomer” students who need additional help keeping up with the classroom, adapting to a new environment, and learning a completely foreign language.

How much time do you spend on service per week/month?

5hrs. per wk./20 hrs. per month

How did you begin to work with your community-based organization (CBO)?

Many medical schools place a major emphasis on diversity in their applications. During my gap years and throughout the application process, I spent a significant amount of time exploring what made me diverse. During this time, I began to identify very strongly with my Hispanic roots on my mother’s side of the family. I vowed to myself that if I were given the opportunity to study medicine, I would fulfill my duty to improve healthcare for the Hispanic community. Logistically, I knew that the best way to

understand the struggles that the Hispanic community faced was to get involved in community service. I came into medical school with a strong will to find the right organizations to join that would help me accomplish my mission.

I struggled to find the right fit for the first several weeks. My will started to fade as it began to drown in a flood of schoolwork. I even had to drop my medical Spanish elective. After the storm of work had passed, the will resurfaced. I met with Shane Bryan, the assistant director of SOURCE. I told him all of my interests and he helped me come up with a detailed list of organization to look into and potentially commit to. Shortly after our meeting, the perfect opportunity came up on my radar. The CJR NeSST program.

What do you enjoy about or gain through community service?

Having been a student in school basically my entire life, many people have invested so much time, effort, and dedication into my education. Although I am closer to my ultimate goal of serving others as a caring physician, as a medical student, there is still so much to learn, and due to my lack of knowledge and experience, I still feel limited in my ability to take care of others. Being involved in community service gives me a taste of what it feels like to give to others and really recharges my batteries during long periods of studying and examinations. I wouldn't be able to get through medical school without it.

How do you find time for service in your busy schedule?

It's all about priorities. Time is very precious and I do my best to use it to do the things that are most important to me. That being said, I cannot take all the credit for fitting community service into my schedule. I've been extremely fortunate to work with amazing teachers and volunteer coordinators who have really given me the flexibility I need to make it work.

Besides finding the time, what barriers related to your service have you had to overcome?

One barrier that I had to overcome was attempting to establish a friendly yet productive environment with the 4 students I was working with. I wanted them to see me as a friend, but also as a mentor/teacher who cared about their growth and development. I managed to accomplish this in several ways. Speaking their native language was a big one. Bringing them delicious dessert that my wife prepared each week was another. Speaking to them about their background, their life stories, and their interests was a critical first step to establishing a friendly relationship. Establishing the teacher/mentor relationship was more difficult and required tremendous patience. They interrupted a lot at first, and did what they could to take breaks and drive me off topic. After a few weeks though, I believe they began to notice that I really took an interest in their work. Thanks to the help of their science teacher, I was able to discuss their assignments with them in depth and help clarify the concepts that they were struggling to comprehend.

How has your training in Hopkins influenced the way you approach service?

My training at Hopkins has really emphasized empathizing and being considerate of a patient's life situation. Additionally, I have met so many incredible faculty and staff that take the time out of their busy schedules to educate me or give me the chance to learn something firsthand. These incredible and passionate people have been mentors to me and have allowed me to begin cultivating a mindset of, "What is the best way that I can give of myself to the situation/person I am currently experiencing/interacting with". With this attitude, I took the initiative to bring in a basic vision-screening card to help my students and some of their classmates check their vision to see if they need glasses (I had struggled with this in school before and I never even realized that I was losing

my visual acuity!) It turned out that one of my students REALLY needed glasses badly. I mentioned it to school faculty and they did an excellent job following up and helping the student get a pair of prescription glasses at a low cost. Additionally, I continue to think of ways that I can help these students, including going over their standardized test scores with them and increasing their awareness of other resources that they can benefit from in the community (like the Esperanza Center).

How does your service shape your development as a health care professional?

As I mentioned earlier, I've been on a long educational road. That road has been all but straight. There's a waxing and waning of motivation and passion. It is these moments of service that remind me why I entered this career. There are few experiences in my life that are more gratifying than when I give what I can to help another and feel appreciated for my efforts. I remember when I came to school after not being able to volunteer for a few weeks. As soon as my students saw me, they came over to hug me. It was truly special to see how much I was able to connect with them in the few hours we had spent together over the past few months. These experiences remind me of why I have invested all of this effort into the career I have chosen to pursue.

What advice do you have for prospective students who are interested in community service?

I would strongly advise them to invest the effort into finding one or a few organizations that they can really connect with before they commit. If done correctly, it will be a critical aspect of their growth as caring health care providers.

What would you say to someone who is unsure of the impact his/her service would have on a community?

I'll tell them that they should speak to somebody with the experience to validate their genuine concern. Time is precious and not all experiences may be worth someone's while if it doesn't match their goals or interests. Therefore, when I found out about this opportunity, I announced it to my classmates and told them that if they were hesitant to commit, that they could shadow me to see how my sessions went. Two of my classmates came to shadow and both of them signed up!

What is the community service accomplishment that has affected you and/or your community the most?

With a different organization I volunteer with, I helped put on a health fair for the community. I put in a lot of effort into contacting local organizations that had resources that the local community would benefit from the most (based on the surveys they had filled out the year before). It felt great to see everything come together nicely on the day of the fair. With all of the community members that were screened and all the health resources and education that they were exposed to at the fair, I really felt that we made a significant impact on the community's health.

That same day, towards the end of the fair, a community member came in to find help getting insurance. I was enthusiastic to help and did what I could to establish a caring relationship. Midway through our conversation, the community member told me that he was experiencing thoughts of suicide and that I was the first person he had told. This trust was sacred, but charged with responsibility. I did everything I could to help him. Retroactively, I was very proud of how I handled the situation, but I was not proud of how much I was able to do to help. I was unable to follow up with him due to legal reasons. I don't know how he is doing now and I will never know the impact I had through my meeting with him. Nevertheless, I pray for his health every day. These experiences taught me of my capabilities in helping the community, but it also taught me of my limitations. There is more to be learned in order to be able to give back more in the future.

Final Comments

Plug #1: GET INVOLVED!, but don't necessarily jump right in with a huge commitment. Test the waters and find an opportunity that you connect with and would be willing to invest more time into. It is truly overwhelming to see how many volunteer organizations exist. It is great for the community, but at the same time makes it difficult for you to find the right opportunity. I recommend that you reach out to SOURCE like I did. They will help boil things down to a few opportunities based on your identified interests.

Plug #2: Are you a Spanish-speaking student who is looking for a quality volunteering opportunity in which you can really make a difference? I was too. That's why I'm so happy that I found the opportunity I was looking for with Commodore John Roger's Newcomer Student Support Team (NeSST). Send an e-mail to dsoffer3@jhmi.edu or rperezd1@jhu.edu if you'd like to learn more and/or get involved!



SOURCE@jhu.edu
SOURCE.jhu.edu