

SOURCE Champion of the Month
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“Find a project or organization you can get behind, and then commit yourself to it.”

What do you do as your community engagement activity?

Originally the activity was to develop a set of web resources for Positively!, an HIV multi-media education program for people living with HIV with low literacy skills. The activity evolved to include providing expert consultation on production and script development and an on-camera role as an HIV health care provider.

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

The listed activity was for 32 hours per term (4 hours a week) for two terms. I completed 32 hours in the first term; however, given the demands of the production schedule and my interest in remaining involved in the project, so far this term I have put in over 50 hours. It’s all good!

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

I enrolled in the Baltimore Community Practicum course and began interning with the Baltimore City Health Department in the fall of 2013. I’ve been providing direct patient HIV care for thirteen years, so my goals for the internship were 1) to gain the perspective of a municipal health department, and 2) to learn about the challenges Baltimore faces with its HIV epidemic.

What do you enjoy about or gain through community service?

Experiencing the application of community-based participatory research principles in real life, and getting introduced to the Baltimore HIV community. Plus production is always fun and I had a fantastic preceptor.

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

For the first term I was able to carve a single block of four hours a week out of my schedule, which I mainly used to build the resource directory. We were fortunate that production for Positively! took place in January, so I spent much of my winter break doing that.

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

It would have been interesting to have been involved in the project sooner, when members of the community were actively engaged in developing the project's messages. I was frustrated to not have more contact with PLHIV, although that was never promised as part of the activity, and I probably got more contact than I would have had the project not been funded when it did. (I did get extensive contact with BCHD personnel, including the Assistant Commissioner of the STD/HIV division, which was fantastic, and I took advantage of several opportunities to have contact with PLHIV – but it required flexibility.)

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

Hopkins has challenged me to constantly look at myself and my actions from the perspective of the community. In every decision about Positively! I thought about whether we were being inclusive enough, whether we were leaving anyone out or keeping someone's voice silent that needed to be heard, and if we were introducing biases or judgments into our scripts that would undermine our efforts to reach PLHIV.

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

I appreciate how easy it is to say the word "community" but how hugely diverse and complex and enigmatic a community actually is.

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

Find a project or organization you can get behind, and then commit yourself to it. You don't want to "phone in" community service; that's a disservice not only to the organization but to your own time and effort as well. Be realistic about how much time you have from the beginning, but also be open to jumping on an opportunity if it presents itself.

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

You can't know that. Think about someone in your life whose words or actions have stayed with you years later. The impact may be less in the work you than in your presence in the organization, your commitment, your belief in the project, or the injection of energy you bring as a student. There are ways to have impact on a community beyond what can be directly measured or perceived.

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

Watching PLHIV give on-camera testimonials about their experiences living with HIV. Not only are they deeply moving, but they are so brave. Positively! will be posted on the Web, making it available to the entire Internet community, which is virtually everyone, and these people are choosing to share their stories so that others may thrive. It's incredibly generous.

Final comments:

Do it! Don't worry about finding the time; it will be there. There are short-term and long-term projects and they all matter. If you're not sure what you want to do, contact SOURCE and let them help you get started. They can match your skills and interests with the needs of the community so it will be meaningful all around. There's always a need; what you do matters!

