

Fighting Hunger with Kentucky Harvest

Introduction:

The mission at Kentucky Harvest is to efficiently deliver donated food through a community network that provides meals to people in need. Kentucky Harvest supplies to churches, schools, shelters, food pantries and various other community based organizations such as Neighborhood House. They gather over 2,000,000 pounds of food annually by going to restaurant's, schools, factories, and basically anywhere they have a surplus of food about to go bad. Through volunteer efforts Kentucky Harvest is able to feed hundreds of hungry people daily.

This paper will examine my personal experience working with Kentucky Harvest from my responsibilities to how this experience has made me a better person. There are many connections to be made from my service work to my education from other peace classes to how hunger affects social change. By the end of the paper we will look at how I wish to use this experience and how it will affect my career choices.

Duties/Responsibilities:

My duties varied from a variety of things. Mainly a typical day would consist of driving to the Kentucky Harvest building and checking in. This is where the volunteers picked up the list of donors for that day which was essentially a list of restaurants or schools offering food. At 9 A.M the locations are divided up among the volunteers. Therefore, if you showed up past 9 no work for you that day. After you are assigned locations you go out and pick up the food then deliver it to a church or soup kitchen where they will use the food. But sometimes your car might

fill up before going to all locations. This means multiple trips or multiple donors to get rid of some food to make room for more.

When finished going to every location we would deliver the food, which also could vary. Sometimes they will have you unload all of the food yourself and just start letting the people who need it start taking it. I remember a day I pulled up to Walnut Street Ministries and had people walking up to my car asking for bread while I unloaded. This gave me more hands-on interactions with the people I was truly helping. But at other times they would have me discreetly deliver the food in the back kitchen away from the people eating it. Often these kitchens would offer help unloading my car which was a relief after loading it all.

On rare occasions, they would have me take the big Kentucky Harvest panel truck to food manufacturing plants to pick up pallets of food. For example, I remember going to Lays chips manufacturing center in the industrial part of Jeffersontown. There they had me pick up 3 pallets (about 40 boxes) to take to St. Joseph Orphanage. They made me feel rewarded for my efforts because they sent me a nice letter thanking them for the chips a couple days after the delivery.

Challenges:

The service work has plenty of personal challenges. But the organization itself also faces many obstacles. For starters on my first day I let them know my background and my connections to other non-profits they work with. Shortly after informing them this they urged me to seek out funders for the organization as they can always use more help. They did not hide the fact that they struggle with funding as most organizations doing this type of work can always use more cash. Other challenges they had was the volunteers. Lots of people are only there because Kentucky Harvest has partnered with the courts to inform offenders who need court ordered

hours they can help out at Kentucky Harvest. This leads to people who truly don't wish to help. I had heard about helpers just taking the food for personal use, not going to all the locations, or not delivering the food in time. For example, they had one person who had gotten a DUI and lost their license. They showed up to help but had no transportation and couldn't legally drive the company U-hauls or van. Occurrences like this puts a damper on the process of dividing up the labor.

Other challenges they face boil down to communication. It was not rare to show up to a location and they had no food. I remember at a Little Caesar I had the guy working say they had donations. But by the time I arrived the manager had thrown 20 pizzas away because he didn't know they were being donated. Other times you might be arriving during a lunch rush and no one can assist you. Often places call Kentucky Harvest saying they have donations but when someone comes to pick them up they don't have any. It wasn't uncommon for Kentucky Harvest to contact shelters asking if they need food. But then when the food arrived people didn't know they had a donation coming or they did not know it was going to be this much food so they pick and choose which food they want. Leaving the rest of the food for the volunteer to deal with. This often meant going to another donor who would take it.

Personal challenge's I faced was the mess dealing with discarded food can make as well as how much of a workout it is moving that much food. By the time I finished my first week I had learned to buy a tarp, put my back seats down, and run the tarp through the whole back of my car. Most times places did not wrap up their donated food. From Outback Steakhouse giving me frozen meats in untied bags so it thaws and leaks all over the car to Starbucks giving me a bag of bagels that roll all over the car when the bag tips over. Some places like Kroger will leave

the donated food outside in the rain. Other places would give food that wasn't even wrapped. For example, giving me loafs of bread without anything to wrap it in.

Lastly the labor itself is very challenging. I had never worked in a plant before and loading 3 pallets of chips is a lot of work. To put some perspective into things I had never driven a U-Haul until that day. I had to take said U-Haul and back it into a loading dock, which again is a first for me. I then am told "it's these 3 pallets, get them out of here". I then had to use a forklift for the first time in my life. Needless to say, that first pallet ended up all over the ground from falling and I had to load each box separately. A lot of the work involved heavy lifting which soon wore out my back. It's partly why I got so burnt out midway through my hours. Not to mention the wear and tear it also has on your car. I just had to look at the bright side and realize the workout was good for me and my work was truly helping someone.

The People We Help:

Kentucky Harvest teams up with community organizers and churches to help distribute the food to people in need. The use of the words "people in need" can mean a variety of different things from families living in half way homes, to homeless men who have wandered in off the streets to eat at soup kitchens. This aspect is what truly made me feel as if I was helping a bigger cause. Hunger is not something that only plagues the homeless or severely poor. Food desserts can make it so families just can't get access to proper food. Some people who get the food are not struggling as bad as others. Some just do it to save a few bucks here and there. Some get food because they wouldn't have had any other meal if it wasn't for Kentucky Harvest. So, the spectrum of people we help can range from all sorts of people. For example, often we donated to Kids Café which serves food to kids in the areas where food desserts are prominent. For some

children, Kids Café is the only meal they will have all day. Other kids are merely eating it because it's better than the food they have at home (healthier.)

The people we help is what gives me that moral call within that our books, *The Call of Service* mentions. Even though the bulk of my time was spent doing work alone I still had a sense of proper morals while completing the service. What solidified my moral effort was being able to, at times, interact with the very people that benefited from the service. I started to build connections at these places which devolved into a bond. For example, I often took donations to Walnut Street Ministries in old Louisville. There is a young man who I believe was named John. He uses the services at Walnut Street Ministries and in return he often helps out. John was one of the most caring people I had encountered during my work. He always was smiling and every time I pulled in with a delivery he seemed excited. Not for the food but because John is a massive Star Wars fan. So much so he frequented Star Wars wikis of fans who dive deep into story lines and finding hidden meanings or "Easter Eggs". I too enjoy the films and work in a comic book store so was always thrilled to discuss Star Wars with him as we unloaded my car. Every time I dropped off food I would end up staying for 15 or 20 mins after unloading to talk with John about Star Wars.

But John really taught me a lot in many different ways. One of the first things he made clear to me was that he was religious. Everyone at Walnut Street Ministries always tells you good bye with "God bless you". I went to catholic school and slowly became detached from the faith. I remember being in 3rd grade at St. Raphael's and having teachers tell me I can't read Harry Potter because of witch craft. This was shortly before the first movie came out so it wasn't a huge phenomenon yet. So, John really intrigued me that he could be so into Star Wars while also keeping his faith. I would consider myself an atheist but John made me realize I myself hold

such prejudice towards church. I was enlightened and intrigued to see someone so passionate about two things from polar opposites and draw connections. After talking to John I realized it wasn't so polar opposite. I still don't consider myself religious but John really showed me that even with your faith you can still find meaning in stuff like Star Wars or Harry Potter. In a sense, John gave me hope that faith can be more progressive.

Another person I interacted with regularly was at the Family Scholar House in old Louisville. I never got his name but we often talked about helping the community. Early on he assumed I was merely delivering food for court punishment, which was an often stereotype I noticed when doing the service. He had told me about how he was in prison and couldn't find work. He became a resident at the scholar house, which he accredits keeping him out of jail. When he heard about why I was truly doing the service work he seemed greatly interested as this is what led us to always talk about community outreach. He always made sure to thank me. Not merely for the food or my service but because he could tell I was invested and wanted to create change. As did he. I would let him know about upcoming committee meeting involving the community and he would always give me his piece of mind on what is causing all the problems affecting his community.

Sadly, one thing I have learned from my father who has worked in social work for 30 plus years is that a lot of the people you will help are not so loving of you to help. It might be someone wanting to hold on to their independence or it could be a mentally unstable person. A prime example was the first time I ever delivered to the Walnut Street Ministries. I had no idea where to drop the food off so I walked into the waiting room of people who didn't have health care and awaiting medicine. I started having a hard time breathing and as I walked out a police officer asked about the woman who was spraying mace. The kitchen staff had told me a lady

went crazy after waiting too long so she sprayed her mace in the waiting room. The staff quickly took her into a room saying they will send someone in but had really called the police. Sadly, everyone at the church knew the lady from previous encounters and knew she had mental problems. The kitchen staff told me it was common when helping the sick to which I remembered my father saying not everyone will appreciate the help because they have too much on their plates to even recognize you. And just like the book the *Call to Service* mentions you might help someone out for years and never think you ever mattered. But you later find out on their death bed or when they finish battling their demons that they always valued your efforts.

Expectations vs. Reality:

Going into this service work with Kentucky Harvest I expected all sorts of different things as I was told by friends that the work varies. I was also told they would gladly give me hours anytime I am free. I expected getting a firsthand experience from interacting with those struggling with hunger. Once I started making runs to the locations I expected getting very little food at each stop as I truly didn't know how much food places waste. I didn't expect to have as much freedom as I worked. Nor did I expect them just allowing anyone to drive the company cars. Lastly my expectations were to make a lasting impression on those I helped and vice versa and hoped to gain insights into how hunger can be fixed.

The reality was that work did vary in the sense that you never knew what the next day had in store. Unfortunately, Kentucky Harvest has changed its policy and no longer allowed me to just show up whenever. Every day we had to check in by 9 A.M. But after "check in" I was given plenty of freedom. For example, if I was hungry I could simply stop for lunch whenever or even eat some of the food donated. I never really did this besides the one Starbucks pastry I ate. Some places would even offer me free lunch for helping. Traffic in the city can be hectic to I was

never really on a time frame to get to locations other than being at the schools before 10:30 A.M when kids start school lunch. The director of Kentucky Harvest has so much freedom he will allow just about anyone to drive the U-Hauls or vans, which seems like a liability waiting to happen.

I knew America wasted a lot of food but in reality, I had no clue the amount of food wasted. The Kroger' in Prospect alone gives me nightmares. That place daily was throwing away 3-5 shopping carts full of bakery good, such as cakes, brownies, bread, cookies, doughnuts etc. Each time this Kroger had so much food it would fill up my car before I could go anywhere else. Plenty of times places would tell me they had no food that was about to go bad. Not every place would have a lot of food but by the end of the day your car would most certainly be full from all the stops.

Lastly, I realized that at first it was difficult to make firsthand experiences. I quickly realized most of my day to day was spent alone or with the director running around the city picking up food. After my first week of this is when I became burned out and sought service work elsewhere in committees and at the family health center in Portland. But after reading past the burnt-out part in *"The Call of Service"* I understood that even if I wasn't making connections through firsthand experience I was still helping. I took some time away from Kentucky Harvest and came back with a better attitude. I asked the director for more hands-on experience and he gladly worked that out. My last couple weeks I was helping set up and serve food at events, such as a cookout at the Women's Center. Even though my first week or so wasn't as I expected I realized I could still make connections in the last hour of the day when I am unloading the donations. I know John made a lasting impression on me with his Star Wars talk mixed with religion. The man at the Family Scholar House made a lasting impression on how much that

organization can save lives. Therefore, I think it's safe to say in reality I did get firsthand experience as well as made lasting impressions. That is apparent from the letter St. Joseph's sent me about my service.

Availability and limitations:

Availability was perfect. They could use the help every day so I could just show up any day of the week. The only issue that affected availability was how far out their building is. The organization is on the Sysco food plants property, which is out off National Turnpike in Fairdale. As I have mentioned if you did not show up by 9 A.M you couldn't work. Therefore, you would have to head there extra early in case traffic was bad. It also seemed redundant at times to drive all the way out there for a piece of paper with locations of places back in the city where I just came from. But you never know what each day has instore so that's why going out there was necessary.

Course connections:

Let's start with my PEACE 550 class since this service work can be thanked to that class. The book alone in this class speaks volumes to the student as they work through their service work. In my second or third discussion board post I had mentioned being burnt out. I slowly drifted away from my service and started reading more of "*The Call of Service*" by Robert Coles. As I read along I started to understand more how the service can make you feel this way and how working through it and finding a moral purpose will help you get more out of the service. One quote that represents how I felt when burnt out is "many doing service comment on their second thoughts, their lagging interest in the work being done, their feelings of being winded or out of breath, footsore and just plain beaten." (Coles, 1993.) It feels cheap using a

quote pertaining to the civil rights for my service but this is exactly how I felt doing my work as well as I felt my work wasn't truly making a difference.

“Burnout is a surrender, Dr. Martin Luther king.” (Coles, 1993.) This speech opened my eyes as to why I can't give into the surrender. I can't create hazards in my work nor can I let depression from the work bring down my work ethics. I am not too old for this, I am young and have plenty of goodness to give. What gave me clarity was that “youthful activist are often able to use such low points to become more realistic and reflective and, in the long run, sturdier in the community service work they usually continue doing.” (Coles, 1993.) I am only getting older and now is my time to shine when it comes to really making a difference. This quote hit deeper than just Kentucky Harvest given the political turmoil we are facing. I hope the older me never surrenders and still understands how one can feel the need to surrender but doing so is a disservice to those you have helped or those still needing help.

I don't have access to my PEAC 325 course syllabuses but I do remember a great deal of what was taught as well as have some readings from that class. I remember reading Thich Nhat Hanh's *Being Peace* and how it pushed this idea of watering the good seed within you. That the more goodness we commence on others the more our seed will grow. And vice versa, if you water the bad seed within you it will have poor outcomes. This is heavily connected to my service because watering that seed is what has brought me here in the first place. My service work is merely a continuation of me watering that seed and allowing it to grow. “If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace.” (Hanh, 2005) This is why I couldn't surrender. I couldn't allow for my self-pity to reflect back onto those I had worked with. You can't give compassion if you don't have compassion towards yourself according to Thich Nhat Hanh.

In "*Being Peace*" we are reminded that "understanding means throwing away your knowledge" (Hanh, 2005), which goes perfectly with my service learning. I didn't start to feel a moral purpose until I threw away what I knew and approached this service work wanting to learn. I didn't know about half the organizations Kentucky Harvest partnered with nor did I know how much food was truly being wasted. Once I opened my eyes more clarity fell over me. I had ignored how many people go hungry in this city and over looked how my service helped get food in the hands of people who need it, Even with John at Walnut Street Ministries. I would have never interacted with someone like that outside of my service. But I had a better understanding when I let me views of the catholic church go. Hahn also once said something along the lines of conflict still arises because we feel anger when we can't understand someone. This has always stayed with me because it helps we realize that I need to better understand people to help combat conflict.

PEAC 350 is a bit harder to connect to my service learning in that I was never mediating "others in managing deep-seated interpersonal conflict." (Billikopf, 2014) But a lot of what we learned about listening stuck with me in my service work. Being an active listener can help build those connections in the field because often people just want someone to listen to them. I would stay after twenty minutes with John to discuss subjects like Star Wars because I could see how excited he got when discussing it. It was like when you get so excited you start rambling and jumping from topic to topic but still with Star Wars characters and universes the whole time. We even talked about Star Wars themed cook books.

I at times found myself using the mediation tools I learned in PEAC 350 to interact with the director of Kentucky Harvest. As you remember I didn't feel as if I was being utilized enough at the beginning of my service. Therefore when I approached the director about my

concerns I found myself nearly following the 7 words of confronting an issue. I first had “establish a psychological connection.” I felt weird just coming back in from missing a couple weeks with my concerns. So, I approached the director just wanting to talk and was able to ask my questions in a way that he just assumed we were discussing ways of improving the organization as that’s something he always discussed. I remember sitting in his office discussing this and telling him if he wishes to experiment with other outreach ideas let me know. Now that my foot is in the door I followed the second step by letting him know there was something important I need to talk about with my experience. I briefly discussed my concerns which skipped step three and went right into step four since there is no conflict between us. After sharing my “interest and fears” we “looked for sustainable solutions. (Billikopf, 2014.)

I picked SOC 453: social change for this topic because of how much food can create social change. One lesson I remember from this course was that canned goods become a life saver due to war. More Americans died during World War 1 from hunger or sickness from rotten food than in battle. So, America came up with canned food to preserve the foods over longer journeys. Another example of how food creates social change is “sweet n low”. This controversial ingredient causes cancer and was almost outlawed in court until diabetics spoke up and demanded they be allowed to use the “sweet n low” as it is the only thing allowing them to have sweet drinks. Another great example of how much food can affect social change is the global trade of foods. Even this can have effects on pricing and access to certain foods, which can lead to things like food deserts. The battle of hunger isn’t just localized. It’s global and big business is what gets in the way. “the restructuring of agriculture in all countries in response to the demand by transnational agro-food corporations for inputs to manufacturing and distribution networks, cast doubt on the very idea of nations as an organizing principle of the world

economy... national states are now reinforced by the international payments system and undercut by transnational restructuring of products.” (Heffernan, 1994.) As we all know hunger plagues all sorts of nations. Sadly, the global economy is a leading cause as to why many nation states go hungry. They are under sold on their products and most of the product is exported and sold for pennies in more developed countries.

This corporatization of food markets greatly affects the manufacturing of food. In America farms are closing at an alarming rate. One study we discussed in social change was about dairy farms. It looked at how small family run dairy farms with less than 125 cows struggle to make ends meet when they have to compete with corporate farms that house hundreds of cows inhumanly. The more family farms that shut down the more that market gets saturated with less adequate meat or milk. Not to mention when these farms close that’s one more family struggling to put food on the table. A lot of issues plaguing hunger involves trade deals and corporations low balling farmers and laborers overseas. In simpler terms “the big famers were harried and driven by the demands of an incredibly complicated system.” (Harper, 2000.) I think the global aspect of hunger is so complicated that corporations might not even understand it.

One major theory discussed in social change greatly affects hunger and that is food deserts. A food desert is somewhat self-explanatory. It is a geographical area represented by census tracts, often times referred to as neighborhoods, which have very little access to nutritious foods. As I mentioned about Kids Café many of the kids aren’t going hungry but they lack the healthy food they need to grow. If you went to the heart of Portland in the west end of Louisville you would see the McDonalds does great business because it’s the only cheap option they have close by. In some neighborhoods the 7/11 or gas station is the only place to get such things as a banana or apple. But often they are already going bad. Sadly in America if you want to eat

healthy you need extra money and a car to get you to locations with healthier options. I was on the committee for the West Six Food port in west Louisville. That committee primarily focused on eliminating a food desert and getting veggies to the community. Sadly the funding was lost for this project. Lastly not all food deserts means they only have access to bad foods. Some food deserts literally have no access to food without a trip into the Walmart. These food deserts tend to be out in rural areas.

Transportation surprisingly is a major factor involved with food deserts. “Fewer than one in five” people have to travel outside their census tract in order to get groceries. (Wright, 2016) This is a major problem for people in poverty because public transportations isn’t always up to par and traveling that far can cost a lot, as well as buying healthier cost more. There are several theories as to why food deserts exist. For rural areas it seems it “is that chain supermarket stores have put smaller neighborhood mom and pop grocery stores out of business.” (Wright, 2016) A prime example of this is Litchfield Kentucky. If you get off the exit in Litchfield you are met with this lovely town. You can tell the town is old by the architecture and how the city hall is right in the heart of the town. Circling around city hall is nothing but store fronts that have been sitting empty for years now. The reason behind this is because a Walmart superstore opened outside the small town. Mom and pop stores couldn’t compete with prices and now their town looks like it is part of the rust belt. When you leave the town and head towards the Walmart you see kids hanging out in the parking lot and families buying groceries whereas the town itself is more of a ghost town. Litchfield though has poor public transportation since it’s more rural. Thus if you don’t have a car and live in the center of town you don’t have many option when it comes to food.

For inner city food deserts researchers argue “because the median income dropped when affluent residents migrated to suburban areas in the 1960s through the 1980s.” (Wright, 2016) this can be seen by UofL. Many students are living in homes that once were mansions for the mega rich in Louisville. You can look at Portland’s history and see how it was a hub for trade and was the heart of the city before the locks and dams were built. Then traders didn’t have to stop in Portland and could continue going, which migrated the city eastward. When this happens stores close and competition takes over. There are reasons certain grocery stores won’t build in inner cities, because there is no profit there. There is a reason McDonalds does much better in Portland than Subway. It’s because of cost and the desert in which these residents live in food deserts. In my opinion this is what is greatly affecting hunger across America. Too many places would rather throw food away than help those in need.

What I have gotten from this experience/future plans:

I have learned a lot in my service work. Not just from this class. Over my years at UofL I have helped with refugee ministries, countless committees across Kentucky and have helped fight hunger, all of which have made me a better person and helped me better understand the world. The type of education students learn from this service isn’t something that can be taught in classrooms. The integrity and moral purpose you get out of the service can’t be matched. Each time I have represented UofL it has warranted praise and has opened the doors to all sorts of job prospects. Me working with Kentucky Harvest put me in contact with a wide range of nonprofits and outreach programs across Louisville. Personally, my experience will allow me to grow into a better person and has opened my eyes to new perspectives as well. Academically speaking this experience was like dipping my feet into the field work involved with sociology. It helped me

learn things that can't be taught in classrooms, it taught me to adopt and that I am not always going to have the answers but need to work through that confusion to find the answer.

“People who work at community service or enlist in privately sponsored or government service programs are also anxious to help launch a career.” (Coles, 1993) My plans after my bachelors is to find a job that will be willing to fund schooling for my masters. I need a masters to work in research but in a way the experience I had is somewhat research. I got field experience and learned new variables that I hadn't recognized affecting hunger. As well as interacted with countless programs across Louisville that help with those in need. Having these interactions opens up job prospects within those organizations. I have already been asked to continue helping with the family health center in Portland which could lead to a job. I view the experience as a job opening opportunity. I of course don't want to stay at my first job right out of college. But I want to be sure my first job out of college helps push me in the direction I wish to go with research. If I have learned anything from my years in social work and my time in peace classes is that you can learn a lot from just listening and interacting with people struggling.

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