

Family volunteers receive new friends, a dip in the pool and a serenade

Family volunteering is fun-filled, eye-opening, life-changing

By Todd Svanoe

Living on a serene, wooded dead-end in a Middleton neighborhood full of eager playmates, my wife and I are quite content on a weekend to simply hunker down at home and let the kids romp freely. But when "walnut tag" gets out of hand and Star Wars play turns to fighting, it's a good time to leave our comfy digs and go serve someone in need.

Volunteering as a family not only gets our focus off of ourselves for a change, but also teaches children civic responsibility, inspires neighborly compassion, and builds family pride.

Like most parents today, before we began volunteering, Vicki and I felt stretched to our over-scheduled limit. With soccer practice, piano lessons, homework and play dates piled onto laundry, grocery-shopping, and meal preparation, it seemed "family time" escaped us. But, ironically, volunteering has lowered stress and brought us together.

This is a common experience, according to Kathy Martinson, Director of the United Way Volunteer Center, who directs volunteers to 250 nonprofit organizations in Dane County. "People are very busy and don't want to take time away from their families, but we're seeing more and more families contacting us who want to volunteer as a way of spending time together."

Choose an area of interest

Our family found serving the homeless something we all cared about, but better yet, a type of service which gave both of our children jobs they could handle. So we joined our church in serving monthly meals at the downtown Grace Episcopal men's shelter.

With a little supervision, Jacob, 5, stocked shelves and stuffed baggies with vegetables. Rachel, 8, organized and distributed condiments and waited tables. Vicki and I dished out food and welcomed guests with a smile.

On our first outing, the kids were eager beavers, with heads held high. Surprisingly, each in turn pleaded with us to return again soon. Learning to try new things and step out of one's comfort zone, while potentially awkward at first, can foster a sense of adventure in children and keep life from becoming too predictable.

"Getting younger kids exposed to volunteering," says Martinson, "instills in them that it's important to give something back to their community, and it will always be a part of their lives."



Photo submitted by the Oliveras family

Maria Oliveras, 11 (pictured above, right, with her younger sister Michelle), discovered she had a fondness for the elderly. She made this discovery while caroling at a nursing home with the Girl Scouts. Her mother, Karel, fostered this feeling by allowing her daughter to serve in MOM's Project for Older People. Maria began by helping a vision-impaired elderly man enter large-print addresses into an address book.

Next, she dusted and cleaned for a woman who was recovering from a hip replacement, "We really hit it off," said Maria of her relationship with the woman, which has developed during 15 visits. "She has all kinds of stories to tell me, and I love to listen to stories. For example, I take dance classes and she tells me about how she danced when she was young."

The woman became like an adopted grandmother. "We had her over for dinner, which I prepared out of my American Girl cookbook. We had hors d'oeuvres, roast tenderloin, and sparkling grape juice."

Surprised by love

Like a tennis serve, volunteer service can begin a volley of kindness and unexpected goodwill between strangers. Maria's family was invited by their new friend on both days of a

scorching hot summer weekend to be guests at her condominium pool. This special time together made the mutual "adoption" official, said Karel. "This woman has really become a part of our family. She spends the winter in Florida, and we can't wait for her to come back."

Our family, too, was surprised by love. On our visit to the homeless shelter, we reached out to befriend the men who came to dine. Only minutes after we sat down with our guests, a man from Ghana began spontaneously to serenade the children with a song about the importance of paying attention in school. The dining hall erupted with applause.

Next, a young man approached, correctly guessing Rachel's age. She reminded him of his eight-year-old daughter, he said. "She lives with her uncle and aunt in San Francisco. I wish I was stable enough to care for her," he said, tearfully, turning toward the kids. "Would you remember to pray for her?" We felt honored he trusted us enough both to share and to ask.

Eyes wide open

Two days later, as we drove by the Kohl Center, Rachel shouted, "Look, there's that man!" We rolled down the window and waved. Another day, while we were walking, Jacob's eyes became as wide as Frisbees as he found a baggie with vegetables strewn on the ground. He knew where they had come from.

Some time later, on the Capitol Square, I again met the man who had asked us to pray. Proudly, he reported that he had been off of crack cocaine for 65 straight days. I thanked God I was there to share his victory. It amazed me how my family's short stint as volunteers had opened our eyes to a slice of city life we would not have otherwise seen.

Family volunteering has broadened our horizons and given us priceless new connections to our world. At first, volunteering seemed like it would eat up too much time. But these have become memory-making experiences and regular family time that we all eagerly await.

Todd Svanoe is a freelance journalist and proud father of three, who, along with his wife Vicki, graduated from the UW-Madison.