**Youth Volunteer Scholarship**

By: Hallie Sweeter

Ever since I was small, I have always visited nursing homes to see my mom, who is a nurse. My dad would swing us by, dropping off a coffee for her, and she would take me around to meet her patients. I remember their smiling faces, and them reaching out to shake my small hand. In the beginning, I recall being shy and quiet, but as I grew older, I became more social and would happily chat with the residents. This was really beneficial to shaping me as a person, as it helped me become comfortable around adults, leading me to be confident when talking with authority figures and others older than me.

In eighth grade, I was given the assignment of doing a capstone project, and I knew immediately what I wanted to do. After meeting so many of my mom’s patients, I was extremely comfortable in the setting of a nursing home, and I greatly enjoyed interacting with them when I visited. I remembered how it felt when I saw their faces light up as my mom introduced me to them, and then asking me numerous questions on school, activities, or about what I was interested in. I knew that for my capstone I wanted to talk about the effect volunteering and socialization has on seniors. One statistic that stuck out to me the most was from a study where it discovered that lonely seniors were 50% more likely to develop dementia. This quote stuck with me ever since. There are also increases in mortality from heart disease and strokes that are caused by the same social isolation. This further helped solidify my desire to volunteer with seniors at St. Therese. However right when I was preparing to apply as a volunteer, covid hit. My class was unable to complete our capstone projects, and many rejoiced over it being canceled. However, I was upset that covid had ruined our plans. My great aunt was supposed to volunteer with me as my chaperone, and not only was I excited to spend more time with her, I was also looking forward to meeting and talking to seniors. Luckily, I had an opportunity again to apply in the fall of 2021.

On Thursdays, my school lets out an hour earlier, and while many were unsure how to spend their time, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I applied to volunteer in the residential beauty salon. I helped the head beautician by helping bring residents down to the salon, doing the laundry, and helping decorate for the various holidays. However, the most nerve-wracking job for me was calling the residents to remind them of their appointments. As tech-savvy as my generation is, calling others on the phone is not something most of us have much practice outside of friends and family. The first time I called someone, I was extremely nervous, and stumbled over my words. Luckily, as time went on, I got more practice, and learned to speak up so they can hear me better. However, my favorite job was going and walking with the residents down to the salon. At first I was a little shy, and didn’t know what to say, but thankfully the holidays were approaching. The week before Thanksgiving, I asked for people’s favorite pies to eat, and many answers surprised me! While there were the expected answers of pumpkin and apple, there were also mentions of rhubarb and pecan. One lady excitedly told me about how her great grandson was coming over, and they were going to bake an apple pie together. Another mentioned how she had always tried to replicate her mother’s pecan pie recipe, but never quite got it. When I left that afternoon, I thought about all the stories I heard throughout the day, and thought back on their answers as I ate my pie of choice at Thanksgiving dinner. The week before Christmas led to some interesting conversations as well. I learned of many different traditions and meals. I heard about favorite holiday sweaters and old decorations passed down throughout the family. As the weeks went by afterwards, I could feel both the usual residents going to their appointments and I warming up to each other, and I now remember them by name. Volunteering has made me feel like I belong. The smiles and nods from residents as I pass brightens my day, and I think about my experience for the day when going home, already missing going and picking up the towels from the dryer, or walking someone back to their apartment.

In conclusion, volunteering with seniors is something I think more people should do. Every Thursday, I looked forward to going to St. Therese and helping in the salon. With my help picking up the residents, it saves the beautician time she can use to make sure their appointments are enjoyable, without having to worry about needing to go escort someone. For many of the residents, going to get their haircut and washed might be the highlight of their week. As Andie MacDowell says, “Talking to your hairdresser is almost like talking to your therapist.”. When you visit the salon, it is important to feel at ease, and you can almost feel your worries disappearing as your hair gets transformed into something new. A large sentiment amongst my generation is our fear of talking to authority and adults, and I definitely feel that volunteering with seniors can help with that. When talking to them, I learned new ways of having conversations, creating a large arsenal of topics to talk about. One thing I think is important about volunteering is the exposure you have to many different types of people. For instance, over the summer, I volunteered as a camp counselor and worked with third and fourth graders. The conversations I had with them were extremely different from the conversations I might have with my friends, which differ from the conversations I had with the seniors. The ability to be comfortable talking to a wide variety of people is an extremely impactful skill, as it helps connect you to others around you. Volunteering with seniors has shown me that, and I will be forever grateful for the opportunities, life skills and lessons that have been offered to me through this program.