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OPINION > COLUMNISTS

Small actions can reap big impacts

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[Editor's note: This is a two part series, provided by two AmeriCorps Vista Volunteers who have served this region over the past year. Their stories are in support of National Service Day, occurring April 1.]

In the last minute of STS9's "Peaceblaster" album, an unidentified young woman's speech is played. "There is only hope through action," she says. "No one changed the world by sitting on their couch wishing that someone would do something ... stop hoping for action and be action." This simple, almost random excerpt interjected at the end of the song "Squishface" best exemplifies why I have become active in helping others. Throughout college, I took many sociology courses and became frustrated at the unfairness of this world; I grappled to understand why — if so many people openly recognized the unjustness that affects our society — how do injustices such as racism and poverty continue to exist? However, as I studied theories, wrote papers and took tests that addressed these concerns, I rarely took it upon myself to challenge the parts of society I disagreed with; that is, until I spent a summer working as an intern at a government-funded HIV clinic, Livingstone Hospital, in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

As an unpaid administrative intern at Livingstone Hospital, I was only assigned to menial tasks, primarily taking the sloppily written patient charts and re-organizing and re-documenting the information for increased efficiency in the clinic. Doesn't sound too exciting or impactful? That is what I thought too; that is, until my fellow intern and I recognized what we were doing: saving lives.

We were stationed in South Africa — Port Elizabeth. Surrounding townships have entire populations (often between 75 percent-99 percent) suffering from HIV/AIDS. This created a large influx of patients into the Port Elizabeth hospital. However, due to lack of funds for traveling to the hospital, misinformation from the media about HIV/AIDS, logistical problems, cultural beliefs, stigma surrounding treatment, the inability of patients to take a day off work for an appointment and other significant barriers, many patients were only seen by the hospital once or twice, never to return. Often these same barriers kept regular patients from making appointments and they were therefore only seen sporadically. This created a vast number of untouched patient files, many of which were unreadable due to the doctor's hurried handwriting or were duplicates (or seemed to be because patients had similar names).

Not being able to locate a patient's file or, worse, getting a file mixed up with someone else's file, occurred on a regular basis. Without the correct information, many patients were misdiagnosed, or medication was incorrect or missed entirely, prolonging the patients' suffering. Even though I came to understand this during my time interning in the summer of 2011, I did not comprehend the magnitude of our volunteer work until our last day, when the entire hospital threw us a surprise party and read us poems they had written about how much our work had done for the people of Port Elizabeth. I came home to the United States that fall with a whole new understanding of what it means to be a volunteer and how the smallest action can have the biggest impact on someone else's life half across the world.

Witnessing the positive impact my volunteerism had on those I worked with and for gave me a new perspective on societal issues and motivated me to maintain involvement with HIV/AIDS organizations after I returned to the United States.

The experiences I had volunteering my time in South Africa, and later at Caracole Inc. and SOTENI

International in Cincinnati, influenced me to donate a year of my life to AmeriCorps as a VISTA ("Volunteers in Service to America"), which allowed me to work for the Tri-County Health Network for the past year. Tri-County Health Network is a nonprofit organization that promotes healthcare services in Ouray, San Miguel and Montrose counties, here in the Western Slope of Colorado. Each of the TCHNetwork programs work to bring healthcare to the underserved, and I work primarily behind the scenes, assisting in the marketing and planning of events, researching funding opportunities and grant writing, administrative task, and website upkeep.

My passion for helping others and the experiences I have had through volunteering have shaped my opinion of myself, the world and my place in it. Being a volunteer has allowed me to replace my feelings of frustration and pessimism with satisfaction and a sense of hope. My satisfaction comes from knowing that not only do I have insight into the imbalances and prejudices that occur in this world, but I can also effectuate change. And, from this satisfaction, comes hope — hope that others can realize what I learned in South Africa: Regardless of who you are or what you know, you can make a positive impact on the community you serve. And the more people that come to recognize and act upon this fact, the better things will become for all of us as a global people.

— Laura Cerrezin is the development and communications VISTA specialist at Tri-County Health Network.

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