

Honestly Abe: Service in Philly highlights similar needs at home

By Abe Baker-Butler

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Philadelphia service trip participants pose in front of a mural painted by formerly incarcerated individuals.

Last Thursday, turkey, stuffing, family, and gratitude filled our homes and hearts. As we sat around the table, we caught up with relatives, perhaps navigated fraught discussions of politics, and likely thought about the blessings for which we are thankful.

For me, this time of year—after Thanksgiving, when Chanukah and Christmas are approaching—makes me reflect on how our community can be a better, more generous, forgiving, and welcoming place. Such thoughts were jumpstarted earlier this month when I traveled to Philadelphia on a service trip with J-Teen Leadership, a Westchester-wide teen service organization, to collaborate with Repair the World, an organization that works with partners to reduce inequality in the Philadelphia community.

Our first stop was Cradles to Crayons, where we sorted jackets for children in need. There, an employee told us the following story: two sisters in elementary school were star students. But as winter began, their attendance and grades faltered. When teachers inquired, it turned out the two sisters had to walk to school each morning but had only one winter jacket to share between them. Each night, the sisters would discuss who had more important commitments at school the following day to decide which one of them would get to wear the winter jacket—and therefore be the one who attended school. This story is heartbreaking: how could a jacket make the difference between truancy and academic success? In just one hour, we were able to pack over 1,000 donated jackets. That's 1,000 children for whom a lack of proper outerwear will no longer be an obstacle that prevents them from succeeding in school.

The next day, we took a tour with MuralArts, a nonprofit that employs ex-felons to create art on buildings. The murals were beautiful, but what was most stunning was this: although the rate of ex-felon recidivism in the U.S. is about 80%, for ex-felons who joined MuralArts, the rate was only 20%.

We also worked with the Jewish Relief Agency, alongside many religious, interfaith, and school groups, to pack and deliver more than 2,600 pounds of food. I worked with a Philadelphia high schooler to deliver food boxes and had the opportunity to get to know someone with a very different background and bond through our shared service in pursuit of a mutual goal.

On the third day of our trip, we volunteered at a community garden. At first, the place appeared to be an abandoned lot. Only after weeding and cleaning with the garden's stewards was I able to understand its significance as a memorial to the victims of a gas pipe explosion in the 1980s and a community gathering place.

As my experiences in Philly illustrated, helping those in need doesn't only help to better the lives of others, but it can also be an educational, social, and all-around rewarding experience. And we don't have to look as far as Philadelphia to see similar socioeconomic problems—they exist around the corner in our local community. Throughout Westchester, obstacles to success including food insecurity, drug addiction, child poverty, and unemployment afflict many residents.

According to the 2012 American Community Survey, 12.7% of Westchester children live in poverty, and their families have little money to spend on luxuries like new shoes and clothing. The Sharing Shelf, based in Port Chester, and Kids Kloset, based in White Plains, serve as child clothing banks in our local community. Kids Kloset and Sharing Shelf collect clothing donations of all sizes and fulfill clothing requests from teachers, social workers, and therapists. Both organizations are in need of volunteers and donations (Visit

<https://www.914cares.org/kids-kloset/> and <http://www.fsw.org/our-programs/the-sharing-shelf/>).

Specifically targeted at youth, The Carver Center in Port Chester provides after-school programming, teen programs, fitness programming, tutoring, and nutritional support in our community. The Center is currently looking for tutors, food pantry donations, and summer counselors (carvercenter.org).

Also, consider donating to the Weber Community Garden, which provides opportunities for low-income residents to grow their own organic vegetables (portchestercares.org/weber_garden.html), or reaching out to St. Peter's Interfaith Soup Kitchen, which serves nutritious meals to the hungry multiple times a week (www.stpeterspcny.org/outreach/soup-kitchen). If you are interested in improving healthcare, the Open Door Family Medical Center in Port Chester (www.opendoormedical.org/join-us/volunteer/) offers a range of volunteer opportunities for adults, college students, and teens. Finally, if you're a teenager, consider participating in a J-Teen Leadership project (jteenleadership.org), attending a program at Center Lane, Westchester's only LGBTQ youth and community education center (www.wjcs.com/center-lane-lgbtq-youth-and-community-education-center), or joining the Westchester County Youth Council (www.fsw.org/our-programs/youth-programs/youth-councils).

With just a modest investment of time, we can each make a huge difference.

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