

Philadelphia Service Trip Essay

By Miles Ogihara

Why Philadelphia? It's like every other city, isn't it? Why should I work there and not in my own county or state? These are the type of questions that kept penetrating my head during the build up before the trip. It took some time to discover the meaning behind this specific journey. Philadelphia is unique. It has a rich culture and a deep history but also trouble maintaining a thriving community.

The minute we took our first step on Philadelphia soil, the diversity hit me. To me right were the sorority girls of the University of Pennsylvania outside their house. In front of them were people of color waiting for a bus. And right outside our destination of UPenn Hillel, I could see Hasidic Jews rushing in, Reformed Jews walking up, and just about every other type of Jew also being late. Not many places in America can say that they offer numerous different style of Shabbat services for anyone interested. This Friday night event helped me recognize that Philadelphia is open for coexistence, not just between Jews, but everyone on that block and all the blocks to follow.

The history within Philadelphia was also something to admire. I have been to Chinatown in Manhattan many times, but the one in Philly is quite different. On one of the turns in, there stands a large mural explaining the migration of the Chinese people to Philadelphia. A man even came up to us out of his own will to help us visualize the progress the Chinese people took from being newcomers on the railroads, to Laundromat owners, to protesting for their beloved area, and finally having a place to call home away from the homeland. It was powerful to understand the endurance and tenacity of the Chinese people. Just looking at the street helped me realize that Philadelphia is a special place and we need to help restore it.

But what about doing the actual mitzvot of helping people? Well, that came soon. In between admiring massive murals and eating local foods we got to grasp the hardships of many in the City of Brotherly Love. There are many homeless people along every street that barely can survive. To help these sufferers endure the cold winter, we sorted out clothing for them to pick up. Giving some change on the street is nice and all but it has little impact. It involves

minimal effort from a person to bend down and throw a coins in a cup. But bending over and picking up coats and throwing heavy bags is another story. The work we did would help in the long term for the homeless and make more of a lasting impact. It was fulfilling to know that just an hour and a half of our time would be so important and give the strugglers in poverty one less thing to worry about.

Still, to me, the most powerful piece of work we did was working in the Boys and Girls Club of Philadelphia. Going in to the task, I had no idea about the story behind the building in need of saving. It is the oldest one in America and has lots of history to back it up as shown through the trophies and plaques along the halls. I was specifically given the task of cleaning up classrooms. Education is such an important aspect in the lives of children, especially the ones in need. The power of knowledge can take a person far and help a person rise above bad influences and doubt from others. By helping clean up and make a better learning environment, I felt more whole knowing that this would be used for a good cause in helping a child in need. Painting over the chipped pain along the decrepit walls wasn't just painting, it was repairing an environment to encourage prospering. Every little piece of work was a part of a bigger puzzle in making Philadelphia a better place.

Although Jteen was only in Philadelphia for a short time, we accomplished a lot. It may not have been work that we can keep coming back to do but it was a stepping stone for others to continue. The twenty hours of community service may be great, but the service is beyond that. It helps represent the Jewish values behind Chesed and Gimilut Chasadim. , I recognize that the City of Brotherly Love is extremely unique and can always use more love from anyone willing to offer it.