

Volunteering

A Way of Life

President's scholarship winner builds relationships and experiences growth through volunteering

“KEEPING FIFTEEN children away from shaving cream and paint is like keeping them away from candy—it’s simply impossible!” concludes Elizabeth Popelka.

This is one of the lessons Betsy picked up while volunteering during the summer at Walker’s Point Center for the Arts (WPCA). The Wisconsin nonprofit organization, located in South Milwaukee, helps teach various art mediums to a large group of inner city children over an eight-week span during the summer months.

Betsy feels that her presence was needed for the young people, and that working with children the past few years has been all about building relationships. “I was able to develop a bond with the kids who came regularly. I had many ‘jobs,’ including comforting homesick

children, translating art instructions into Spanish, being a small group leader, encouraging frustrated little artists, and even being a human jungle gym.

“I got to know the kids well and they knew me. I could teach them about art, talk to them, learn about their family, learn about them, personally, and I really value that,” shares Betsy. “Each week brought a different teacher and artistic medium, so the volunteers and supervisor were the only stable sources of instruction,” she adds.

This specific volunteer experience shows what Betsy Popelka, the 2006 President’s Volunteer Scholarship winner, is all about—valuing the people she meets and wanting to help them grow, both personally and artistically.

Popelka has been involved in volunteering her entire life. She recalls being a part of National Mutual Benefit Branch

While working on a project focused on raising litter and waste awareness, Betsy Popelka finds a pair of pants that later became part of a Minneapolis public art installation. It was through an off-campus study program called City Arts by the nonprofit Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA).

717 activities and projects as far back as she can remember. After years of mentoring by her parents and fellow NMB branch volunteers, she became a youth trustee on the branch board and began planning and implementing community service projects alongside the adult board members. She also served on her church’s youth board, facilitating and coordinating youth activities.

Betsy feels that volunteering, especially family volunteering, is as important today as it was when she was growing up.

“My parents taught me the importance of volunteering and the impact it can have on you and those around you. They’ve always been supportive of every-





Betsy visits Park Güell while studying abroad in Barcelona, Spain, during the first semester of 2006.

"Visiting different parts of the country, seeing how cultures are so diverse, experiencing social change, connecting with the people—all helped shape my life." —Betsy Popelka

thing I do," she states. "My art teachers made an impact in the direction I'm going, and my church family was very important, too! They were like my second family."

Betsy's true love is teaching the arts to children. She is currently a senior at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she is double majoring in studio art and art history, as well as double minoring in urban studies and Spanish.

One of her favorite experiences was teaching book arts to school children at the Minnesota Center of Book Arts. Book arts is a contemporary form of art that is beginning to grow in many communities around the country.

Betsy taught young people to create pop-up books, accordion books, and animal books. Some learned the art of bookbinding, as well as how to weave curriculum into the books, such as a story with addition or subtraction facts.

She also touched lives by painting with young patients with severe medical conditions at the Fairview University Hospital in Minneapolis. "It was intimidating at first, because some of the



Proud parents Cathy and Joe Popelka stand beside their daughter, Betsy, as she holds the certificate she received for being named NMB's 2006 President's Volunteer Service Scholarship recipient.

patients were in isolation and you had to put on gowns and everything," relates Betsy. "One of my first experiences was taking the artcart to a session and the patient only wanted to play video games."

Betsy figures that it's good to do whatever it takes to make people forget about the unfortunate things happening in their lives!

In high school, Betsy served as a role model when leading various-aged youth groups at church. "Becoming involved in my community through NMB projects helped me connect with different people. You learn to understand each other's differences," says Betsy. "Sometimes being outside of your comfort zone is important. Each experience helps you grow in some way," she states.

"The most memorable volunteer experiences I had were probably the craziest ones—like the mission trips I went on during the summers in high school—painting houses, working with kids' clubs. Those trips impacted me in a powerful way," says Betsy.

While many students taper off from volunteering when in college, Betsy is one of the exceptions. She and some of her friends moved into a housing community to continue making a difference in the lives of young children. They are tutoring students who live in Hope Community, an affordable housing area with a community center and a mission to help young people succeed.

Hope Community is where Betsy's important work in life will continue throughout this school year, the rewarding work of being a mentor and role model. ♦