

Value in Volunteering

☞ *Top scholarship winner knows what it means to gain through giving* ☞

VOLUNTEERING WITH A CAUSE behind it—that’s Meghan Ryan’s volunteer philosophy. It’s no wonder Ryan received this year’s National Mutual Benefit President’s Award, NMB’s most prestigious scholarship. This honor is awarded to the student who displays the most outstanding volunteer effort and truly exemplifies caring for others.

Meghan Ryan, a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC), is so actively involved in volunteer endeavors it’s hard to believe she has time for anything else. Yet, somehow, she seems to make time for many other activities. During high school she competed in volleyball and softball, played the clarinet, worked on the yearbook, and served as class president, all while working a part-time job and staying active in her church. To top it all off, she was Winnebago Lutheran Academy’s valedictorian.

At UWEC, Ryan is majoring in accounting and currently pondering a minor in actuarial science. Her ambition is to work for one of the “big five,” the five largest accounting firms in the United States. She also aspires to study abroad in Spain or Mexico for a semester during college, stating that the opportunities and experiences it would provide would be well worth the expense.

Meghan has already applied some of her accounting knowledge to her volunteer ventures. In her freshman year at UWEC, she served as the Finance Chairperson for the University’s Relay for Life chapter. In this role she secured donations from local businesses, both monetary and material, and oversaw the funds as they came into

the organization. Her efforts on behalf of Relay for Life aided in raising over \$50,000 for the 2010 event.

Relay for Life is the volunteer endeavor to which Meghan is most closely connected. “Pretty much all of my efforts this year have gone to Relay for Life,” says Ryan. “I have been affected by cancer, so I’m personally connected to the cause.” Having been “affected by cancer” is an understatement; her father is a colon cancer survivor, her aunt survived breast cancer, her grandmother, grandfather, and uncle all passed away from cancer. She is so invested in this cause, she began an internship with the American Cancer Society this fall.

Meghan has experience participating in both small and large-scale volunteer activities. From helping with pre-organized events to planning something from the ground up, she has done it all. In high school, she took on the responsibility of planning a Loaves and Fishes event, a program that provides a hot meal to hundreds of people twice a week. These dinners are organized and executed solely by volunteers. Meghan spearheaded the planning of the event, and along with some friends, contacted local grocery stores for food donations and businesses for donations of plates and utensils. At the end of the venture, she had rallied 15 volunteers and served over 400 people.

Meghan has also pursued volunteering in other aspects of her community. For five years she volunteered as a Sunday school teacher at her church. “It was really fun to see them grow,” Ryan says about her students with a big sister-like pride. “When they started they were in first grade; I

taught them all the way through to sixth grade. It was so rewarding to watch them grow emotionally, physically, and mentally.”

She gives her high school and her college a lot of credit for her volunteer history. Though she was already volunteering in the eighth grade, Ryan says Kay Wege, volunteer coordinator at Winnebago Lutheran Academy and leader of the Viking Volunteer Club, got her more involved in various levels of volunteering during high school. Ryan also praises UWEC for encouraging students to volunteer their time by requiring 30 hours of “service learning.”

In the Viking Volunteer Club, Ryan gave up one lunch a week to mentor an elementary school student through Big Brothers, Big Sisters. Wege says of Meghan, “She was able to successfully manage extra-curricular volunteer activities, a job, and earn top grades, proving she has a very high standard of efficient work ethics.”

Ryan explains Wege played a significant role in shaping her volunteer life, “Even though I had volunteered before high school, she made it so much more than I thought it could be; more fun and interesting, opening my eyes to things I hadn’t even heard of in the community. From her I learned there are so many opportunities; they aren’t going to come to you, you have to go out and look for people and organizations—just jump in and help the best you can.”

In addition to her schools’ encouragement of volunteer activities, Ryan’s parents also helped her discover her passion for helping people. “My parents definitely motivated me to volunteer,” Meghan



explains. “They always said there are less fortunate people out there, know how lucky you are. They encouraged me to spend time in the community.”

It seems Meghan can find an opportunity to volunteer just about anywhere. She worked as a food service employee at St. Agnes Hospital. While working there she also took up volunteering at the Pass Clinic in the hospital doing clerical work. Ryan says she has gained something from each volunteer experience she’s had. In this case, her work with the Pass Clinic introduced her to the business field, a career she hadn’t previously considered.

Although Meghan is only 19-years-old, she is much wiser than her years would suggest. When asked why she volunteers she says, “When I was a young child, my parents did a great job of instilling those values of volunteering and giving back to the community. I really enjoy it, the people I work with, as well as the people I’m serving. With people coming from a variety of different backgrounds and having different histories to share, those experiences shaped me into who I am today.”

Ryan believes she gains as much from the act of volunteering as those she is helping. “I learned to be a better person, count my blessings, to have empathy, to listen to and talk with people, see what they are feeling—I learned that from volunteering.” ♦



Top left: Meghan volunteers for a Relay for Life event in 2008. As someone who has been affected by cancer, this is a cause she is closely connected to. Top right: Meghan serves food during one of her volunteer activities.



Center: Meghan and her peers participate in a Relay for Life event. Above: Meghan pauses with her proud parents for a photo at her 2009 high school graduation. Left: Fellow volunteers pose with Meghan at a 2006 Relay for Life event.