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07.16.2008 | Students, Culture and Society Op-Ed: From the trenches of nonprofit work

By Kate L. Harrington

(Note: Op-ed pieces are the opinions of the author only and do not reflect the position of the University of Dayton.)

When I started my summer job, I thought that, although I didn't "know it all," I knew an awful lot about the nonprofit world. After all, my mother is in nonprofit work and has been most of my life. So as my mom and I are very close, I'm kind of a nonprofit "brat."

The other day I was helping our executive director, Brian, carry some books from his car. I was surprised when he opened it up and the back was full of non-perishable items and basic hygiene items.

Brian has a Honda CRV so you can imagine how much stuff that was – and when I say full, I mean almost to the ceiling. "It's for this food pantry I help out in Arkansas," Brian told me.

I was startled that an executive director of a major nonprofit operation in Dallas would take the time to lend his experience to a food pantry in another state. Brian then went on to say that he's always surprised when he sees people line up to receive basic living needs and that he hopes that we never become used to it. In his words, that should never become the norm.

As I was thinking about the problem of people becoming desensitized, I was struck by this analogy. Nonprofit professionals are like war reporters. We may not be tired, hungry, far from home or in imminent danger (though all those descriptions can apply to most of us part of the time), but we have to fight a battle of our own every day. We fight to see the situation around us as a new challenge on a new day, even if it looks the same as it did the day before, and the day before that.

We're trying to get a story out to people who may want to help but don't want to hear the same bad news. People have heard all this sad stuff before, and they're just glad someone else is doing something about it – mainly because they don't feel that anything they might do would make a difference.

It's true that it's hard at times to think you can bring about change. We live in a world with over 6.5 billion people and in a country with 300 million; 36.5 million of whom were below the fabled "poverty line" in 2006, 17.4 percent of them under 18. And that number is going the wrong direction.

So, what do we nonprofit people do?

We keep trying. We get up in the morning, drive to work and keep trying. We send out e-mails and flyers, we talk to companies and schools. We raise food, clothes and shoes while showing people how to do things such as operate a computer, conduct an effective interview or learn English. My own little corner of the nonprofit world, the Wilkinson Center, serves about 25 percent of Dallas' poor and working poor.

As I was writing this, I considered and rejected different "plans" for would-be volunteers to follow – ideas that many would consider simple and easy steps that would not disrupt their lives but would still give them that warm feeling for helping out.

Ultimately, I rejected all of them, even the idea of donating five dollars a week to a different nonprofit, because I'm not here to preach. What right would I have to do that?

I'm just a normal person who likes movies, books and music, hanging with my friends and talking with my parents. I'm just like you. I'm also, at least temporarily, on the front lines against hunger, poverty, hopelessness and helplessness in North Texas.

These days, with everything on the rise except employment opportunities and income, I'm happy to remain on the battlefield. So far, I think I'm winning.

— Kate L. Harrington is a junior at the University of Dayton and the Exxon Mobil community summer job program intern at the Wilkinson Center. Harrington is pursuing a major in communication and minors in film studies and women and gender studies.