

TESTIMONY OF  
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*"Strengthening Communities: An Overview of Service and Volunteering in America"*

Hello. My name is Tommy Daigle. I was an AmeriCorps member with Habitat for Humanity in Charlotte, North Carolina from August, 2004 to July ,2006. I served two one-year terms immediately following my graduation, cum laude, from George Mason University. It was a fantastic, life-changing, and humbling experience that developed my leadership and life skills through day to day physical labor, confronting new and different life experiences, helping others, interacting with people of all ages from all over the world, serving in a leadership capacity for people many decades my senior, and feeling that exhausted satisfaction at the end of every day - that I had done something for someone else.

Right now I am working as a bike messenger because I am dedicated to service and I need a flexible job until I finish work as a lead organizer for the Bike and Build team that will ride across the country this summer. This project will raise money for affordable housing organizations and will work at Habitat builds along the way. Once I finish that project, I will either attend law school, where I will study civil rights law, or I will go back into teaching. In the meantime, bike messengering gives me flexibility to dwell on service projects that a typical 9-5 job would not.

I want to tell you how I decided to focus my life on service, and what that has done for me.

I have three teachers to thank for my love of service: my Father, Donald Daigle, a teacher in Catholic schools and at Northern Virginia Community College; my Mother, Margaret Daigle, a special-ed teacher in the Fairfax County, Virginia public schools; and my high school teacher, Mary Kay Turner, who is now retired from Bishop O'Connell High School in Arlington, Virginia.

My parents instilled in me social justice principles. I learned from them that when something is wrong, you have the power to change it and you owe it to your community, and the world, to put your ideas in motion and provide for its betterment. They taught me that I truly am my brother's keeper and I always will be. They never told me that I had to serve but they raised me to be responsible and to know that I could make a difference. Service is my path to change.

Mrs. Turner taught my high school World Religions class when I was a junior and my Ethics class when I was a senior. She structured the class like a philosophy class, with strong ideals of Catholic social justice woven throughout. While she taught about broad concepts she taught us to look at things in this world, good or bad, and to form an educated opinion about them. She taught us not to sit and watch things happen but to use the knowledge and our opinions to get involved. We studied human rights leaders and activists throughout history. We studied movements of major non-violent social change. We also studied and mourned those who were killed because of hatred, notably Mathew Shepard and James Byrd; both were murdered in my senior year. Mrs. Turner taught us that a broken system could be fixed, but it would never be fixed with complacency. If there were going to be changes, we would have to make the changes ourselves. Mrs. Turner gave us the opportunity to put our fledgling ideals into action thru many service and activist possibilities she provided.

In college, I focused on my studies so that I would be a strong teacher. While this

was a good thing, it took me away from my ideas of direct service as a means of change. In my last year I took a class entitled “Art as Social Action.” The professors, Lynn Constantine and Suzanne Scott, were both brilliant educators and their class was the boost that I needed. On the first day of class they presented us with a quote from Bertolt Brecht, “Art is not a mirror to reflect society but a hammer with which to shape it”. The quote fit perfectly and I decided instead of going directly into public school teaching I would serve for a year with Habitat for Humanity. I only had to find the means to do it.

The first time I ever heard about AmeriCorps was from a high school acquaintance who joined AmeriCorps\*NCCC when he was 18. I barely recognized him a few years later. While in high school he had gotten in trouble, experimented with drugs, and almost dropped out. After serving with AmeriCorps he was drug-free, attending college, and continuing to volunteer. It left me with a strong first impression of AmeriCorps. I researched how I could work with Habitat for Humanity and found that Habitat for Humanity was an AmeriCorps grantee. I realized I could help people who needed homes and serve in AmeriCorps. It seemed like a great fit.

Another friend put me in contact with her cousin who served in AmeriCorps Habitat. I called her, thinking we would have a five minute conversation. She spent an hour of her time telling me all about her experiences and what to expect if I joined. I was taken aback that a stranger would spend so much time advising me. One of the things I now know is that that is so typical of people who serve in AmeriCorps. They want to tell others about their experience because they want them to have the same life-change opportunity to serve.

Weeks later, I decided to commit a year of service to Habitat AmeriCorps in Charlotte, North Carolina. After the year, I would return to Virginia to teach in the public schools. Needless to say, one year turned into two.

I had a fantastic two years. We worked in 10 and 11-person teams based in Charlotte. We served as crew leaders for groups of people made up of bankers, lawyers, World War II vets, carpenters, and homeowners. They came to us, asked us what to do and expected us to be their leaders. We all grew up a lot in the first few weeks, and we became a very tight-knit group. Over the two years we built close to 100 houses in Charlotte, led and worked with over 5,000 volunteers, and grew into mature citizens. In addition to the work in Charlotte, we worked on houses in Ft. Myers, FL, Jackson County, MS, and Dallas, TX.

The structure of the Habitat Charlotte program incorporated AmeriCorps in everything we did - all the staff and volunteers understood what AmeriCorps was about and certainly had a great appreciation for the support AmeriCorps brought to the program. The training we received was very good. The supervisors were quick to give us responsibility and to put us in leadership situations but would only do so once they were confident that we would were up to the task. Within a few months all members were routinely running crews unassisted by staff members. For most of us this was our first experience in a managerial role.

Serving in AmeriCorps prompts a growth of maturity in almost all members. Your job becomes a lifestyle that recognizes that you are working for things that are greater

than yourself. There is a change in persona that occurs when you realize that you are making a concrete difference in another person's life. There is a sense of civic duty and civic pride when you realize the change in the community that you are a part of.

I want to tell a quick story that reinforced my belief in the importance of our job. In the early summer of 2006, all Habitat AmeriCorps members met in Dallas, Texas, to build several houses. My teammates worked on a house along side the homeowners and AmeriCorp teams from Ft. Collins, Colorado, College Station, Texas, and Seattle, Washington. The house we were building, and the one next door, was for former residents of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans who had lost everything in Hurricane Katrina. We quickly became close friends with the other AmeriCorps members working on the house and got to know the family who, in a few weeks, would be moving in. The family was a married couple in their late 50's and their young granddaughter. They had been separated in the storm and were reunited months later in Dallas. Over a work week of twelve hour days we laughed, became close, worked hard, and built a beautiful house. We were proud of the results.

At the dedication ceremony, we crowded together on the front porch and listened as the Dallas Habitat staff member presented a Bible, a loaf of bread, and a bottle of grape juice. The family was given an opportunity to give their thoughts. As they started to explain how they had been happy in New Orleans and then lost everything, were separated in the evacuation of the Superdome and convention center, and had not known if the other had even survived, emotion overtook them. They held onto each other, crying, unable to do anything other than thank us and thank God for the new beginning. We could do nothing other than congratulate them on the new start and thank them for what they had given us.

We left Dallas convinced of the importance of our service and of the impact that it had not only on the families and communities, but upon each of us. The big question that many of my teammates and friends would later share with me was this: "Whose life was changed more by our service; did the work do more for the family or for us?" It's a question that outsiders laugh at but those who have served understand.

I've met hundreds of AmeriCorps members through Habitat. Of the members I actually served with, more than half are currently serving with other nonprofits or in a public service capacity. Every person I served with continues to volunteer. Service sticks. My team members are proof of that.

The message I want to leave you with is that AmeriCorps members are working to make our country greater. We're proud of our work to improve our country and our communities. We hope that more opportunities will be made available to younger and older Americans. We have a lot of work to do and there's an opportunity for every passion.

Thank you for this opportunity to tell you about my experience in AmeriCorps. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.