

## **Marsha Bush**

### *Shriners Hospital for Children*

Where could I influence children, help them develop their leadership potentials, educate them about agriculture, and have fun at the same time? When I first began my leadership project for the Emerging Leader Institute, I was certain that I wanted to work with a nearby children's hospital in order to meet all of my goals for my leadership project. As I began calling and gathering information, I found that the two nearest hospitals, UK and Samaritan, did not have available positions for working with children. A little shaken and somewhat discouraged, I began to regroup and reconsider my options for service activities.

After a simple telephone call to the Shriners Hospital Volunteer Services Coordinators, I learned that volunteers were readily accepted to serve within Shriners' reputable recreational therapy department. When they asked my reason for volunteering, I explained to them the value of ELI in developing leadership abilities among college students, and I expressed my interest in instilling many of the same characteristics into young people in hospitals. The members of volunteer services seemed excited, even though other obligations prevented me from beginning my project in the recreational therapy department until April 1.

On the first evening of service, I was prepared, yet scared that I would say something wrong or the children there would not accept my ideas. When I arrived, the group was small, as promised since it was a Saturday and many of the hospital guests were out with their parents or home for a fun weekend of activities. The children and youth who were there, however, gathered 'round for some of the activities I had planned.

First, I made it a point to learn everyone's name which meant that I played a few games of modified pool and did a few activities with everyone before beginning what I had planned. I then found that the patients were much more receptive to my ideas because I had showed them I cared.

We began our activities with spaghetti flowers, which involved the use of spaghetti and (edible) marshmallows. Although the teenage boys weren't too receptive to the flower idea, I found that they enjoyed making marshmallow creatures and scenes just as much as everyone else. This activity was designed to make everyone aware of the strengths which they possess, and I found that many of the residents had artistic qualities that set them apart from the rest! We followed this activity with some creative time using color-change markers. Everyone made name tags for their doors, and some of them, being incredibly generous, made cards for their friends who were not in the hospital that evening.

My second and third visits took place on Saturday and Sunday, April 15 and 16. Saturday evening was similar to what I had experienced before, but everyone was distracted by all of the other games and activities which were occurring simultaneously. Therefore, I only conducted a couple of activities such as the beginnings of our stories "Oh, The Places I'll Go!" It was during this visit that I was also able to introduce some of the children to my baby goats and to some dairy cows through pictures. Many of the children had never been near farm animals before, and even though they could not pet the picture, I think they enjoyed listening to my experiences. Since the farm is something I don't see very frequently while on UK's campus, I was more than willing to talk about agriculture as long as they were interested!

On Sunday afternoon, I found that there were a number of other visitors present, so I carried on small discussions and group activities with a few of the patients whom I had gotten to know very well up to this point. I found that our conversations were meaningful, and I felt inspired to go serve after having visited with them. I can only hope that I was as inspirational to them as they were to me! Since Sunday was loud, hectic, and extremely disorganized, I decided to schedule one further visit during which I would be able to have the patients' undivided attention; therefore, my final visit as part of my ELI project is April 26.

During "Marsha's Menagerie" we will be learning more about animals, both domestic and exotic, and we will play an animal name game. The conclusion to our hour together will be a short poem or a small picture sequence (similar to a comic strip) about the things they would see and do as well as the animals they would own if they had a zoo. This visit promises to be exciting and eventful even though I will only have one hour to work with my children rather than two.

Each visit I make to Shriners now makes me feel excited but also expectant. The children who are there each week are incredibly inspirational, and they never seem to be discouraged, even though some of the patients have been there for five to six weeks in a row. I look forward to seeing their smiling faces each time I visit the hospital, yet I cannot help but hope they will not be there but will be at home the next time I visit. The children and youth I have met at Shriners have become dear friends, and they have taught me that leadership involves making the most of the talents we each have been given, and seeking excellence, not perfection

If you would like to learn more about Shriners Hospitals or would like to become a volunteer, please visit their website at <http://www.shrinershq.org/>. I found that my visits there changed my perspective on what is truly important, and new opportunities sprang from my visits. Come see how you can change lives-including yours-today!