

Valerie Dyer

The Emerging Leader Institute

Albert Einstein once said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious," His words echo in my mind as I constantly make many choices in my life. First, I chose to leave the Bluegrass state for the College of Charleston in South Carolina, then I came back to my hometown at the University of Kentucky, and now I'm planning to study abroad at l'Universite de Caen in France for spring 2001. Change apparently enralls me.

The beauty of change and mystery is not only the excitement of seeing and learning new things but the way in which I can explore my true self and make advancements in personal growth. Sometimes the only way to do that is to test myself by trying new adventures.

As an undergraduate student, college has given me not only many eye-opening experiences and academic advancements, but has given me a stronger sense of who I am, where my strengths lie, and what profession would best fit my needs and abilities. The greatest blessing has been the leadership organizations that have come into my life. Both at CofC and UK, I have been honored to be selected as one of their emerging leaders. Here at UK, the Emerging Leader Institute has nurtured the challenge of self-exploration. Each forum looked at an important aspect of leadership in a creative and interactive manner. There was rarely a dull moment! From analyzing my personality, to communication exercises, to looking at a real human brain, ELI allowed me to realize my skills in organization, creativity, and communication.

But the greater task at hand was both the group and individual leadership projects. As a class, we decided to spend a day (playing games and landscaping their courtyard) with disabled adults at Lexington's Bob Brown House. At first, I felt as though the idea was ludicrous. I didn't think that a group of wimpy college kids could pull it off successfully. I was wrong. Not only did I see people shine as they prepared for the day by getting many donations of presents, trees, and plants, but I saw the appreciation in the eyes of the adults whom we helped. I felt grateful and proud to be part of the group.

However, the individual project was not as cut and dry. It was truly up to me to decide what to do and to actually do it. I didn't struggle finding a topic. I am passionate about so many aspects of life that it was hard to choose what to pour my heart into. Spawned by personal reasons and statistics, I decided to educate others about STD's. Finding data on the subject was not difficult. The library and internet provided a plethora of facts. The CDC stated that 1 in 5 Americans have an incurable STD. Other statistics were just as terrifying. The most alarming was the growing number of adolescents with STD's. Something has to be done. Having lived in Lexington all of my life, I decided to try and speak to 8th graders at my former middle school, The School for the Creative and Performing Arts (SCAPA).

The process to do so has been long and it's even still in progress. I have been given two thumbs up by the health and PE teacher, Mrs. Stayton, to speak for an hour to the 8th graders in the beginning of May. My actual speech has been roughly finalized and only needs consultation with the school. It's just a matter of time.

But that's only the beginning. I gave a 15 minute presentation to my ELI class as a warm-up for the big day to come. Since I was speaking to 18-20 year olds, I was able to

alter my presentation and show actual pictures of certain STD's like herpes, venereal warts, syphilis, and gonorrhea. It was shocking to most students but hopefully the image will remain with them. Perhaps they also will educate themselves and others and, in turn, be a leader in this battle.

Although I have learned the valuable lesson of what one ordinary person can do to help others, I understand now the important aspects of leadership. Through ELI, I have now erased my paradigm that allowed me to only think that a true leader was the President, a general, a religious figure. A leader is within all of us. It's just a matter of looking within our hearts for a goal and passionately striving for it. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."