

2010

Yours in Service

Rachael Alexander
City Year, Inc., Boston MA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Alexander, Rachael (2010) "Yours in Service," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 25: Iss. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1078>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Yours in Service

Rachael Alexander

City Year, Inc.

Boston, MA

I got the call from City Year, a non-profit AmeriCorps organization, offering me a position on our first Friday in Washington, DC. The job title, *Education Manager*, was a little cryptic, but from my understanding it was a mixture of everything that I loved: working with children, mentoring young adults, thinking about and planning professional development, and using data in creative ways to assess the organization's efficacy. Before I really realized what was happening, I accepted the job and was told I would be starting on Monday.

The Teaching Years

After finishing my certification program at Eastern Michigan University, I began the daunting task of looking and applying for teaching positions. I was not necessarily in the most job-rich field, either—secondary certification in both English Language and Literature and Art Education. My ultimate goal was to get a job teaching middle school art. Like many of my friends, I ended up taking on substitute positions in the hopes of getting a foot in the door. I don't think I was prepared for the uncertainty that came with job-searching; it seemed like most jobs required years of experience, and I wasn't sure where that "experience" was supposed to come from. This theme of uncertainty continued when I moved home to take my first job as a maternity-leave substitute for middle school art—grades five through eight.

That first teaching experience was much more challenging than I could have possibly anticipated, but it also urged me on to the course through which I would steer in the following years. After a few months of relatively blind searching across the country, I decided to move to Boston to be with my fiancée. In many ways, I felt like I was back at square one—going through the process of sending out resumes and

taking substitute positions as a newcomer to the state of Massachusetts.

I was contacted by a vice principal at a middle school and was hired a week later as a long-term substitute for middle school art, and I stayed on for the remainder of the year working as a Resource Room teacher for eighth-grade English. Over the next couple of years I became a "jack-of-all-trades" in the English department there—a role I gladly embraced, as it allowed me to build experience and maintain relationships within a single school.

The third round of "starting over again" came at the end of the 2007-2008 school year. My husband and I would live in Washington D.C. while he completed a year-long fellowship. Rather than searching for a teaching job again, I really wanted to either take the year to explore another side of education, or do something education-related in the non-profit world. I saw a posting for a position with City Year, a non-profit AmeriCorps organization (<http://www.cityyear.org/>). I had a few friends who had participated in the program, and I had an inkling of what the organization was about, so I decided to apply for the Education Manager position. What followed in the next year-and-a-half continued to push and shape me as an adult who is committed to the field of education in unique and unexpected ways.

City Year enriched my overall feelings and perspectives about teaching, forced me to lead and follow as I never had before, and fostered a greater commitment in me to every child's right to an education.

A New City, a New Chapter, a Renewed Purpose

I came to City Year wanting to be a part of something aimed at helping students and communities, and, while I found that, it was the impact that the organization had on me as *a person* that was surprising. Jumping into the position as Education Manager—a salaried, managerial role—in September, I didn't understand fully all of the demands of the job or the responsibilities that I would encounter. I had always been a fan of experiential learning, and this job would be exactly that.

Arranging the Buckets

In the first few days of work, I started to form an idea of my main “buckets” of responsibility. First and foremost, I would be managing a team of nine full-time volunteers, or *corps members*, aged 17-24, who would be serving at a Washington D.C. charter school Mondays through Thursdays, before school started through after-school programming. I would be responsible not only for their timeliness, their appearance and their duties within the school as tutors, mentors and near-peer role models, but also for supporting their personal goals and professional development throughout their service year.

I felt relatively prepared for all of this, because I had worked with youth in many capacities—classrooms, outdoor adventure camps, training summer hires at Starbucks—you name it. Something that I was pleasantly *unprepared* for was the City Year culture. For many staff and corps members, the *culture* is one of the hardest adjustments, from the uniforms to the call-and-response style of leading meetings, to the physical training (“PT”)—every corps member at a site gets together one or two times per week to do calisthenic exercises and chants as a way to start the day and create a sense of unity. It was in those first weeks that the culture pieces just reaffirmed my sense of belonging to the organization. I loved that a group of people doing such important work in schools was also ensuring that it did not lose sight of the sense of community, fun or idealism necessary to stay focused.

Another large component of my work involved coordinating and planning trainings for our corps of 100 volunteers, as it pertained to school-based service. Anything from youth development to behavior management, tutoring session lesson planning to working with teachers and a school, fell under my training umbrella. This was both daunting and exciting. Being the only person with an education background on staff, I saw many places where I could inject general teaching practice knowledge to enhance volunteer work. As we were partnering with D.C. Public Schools, I also knew that my understanding of school districts and personnel would be helpful in developing lasting and supportive relationships between our organization and the district. This was exhilarating and a bit terrifying, as I had never had the chance as a

teacher to meet with a superintendent or directors of professional development. This part of the job seemed surreal at times because the context was familiar but the content—or at least my participation in it—was not. I had to learn to navigate the world of meetings and networking to both coordinate trainings with the district and involve other possible trainers or visitors to speak with our corps members.

The final “bucket” that fell under my list of responsibilities had to do with leading site evaluation processes. Because City Year is interested in assessing the efficacy of its tutoring work and because it uses so much quantitative (survey) data to inform every aspect of the service model, they rely on people at the site level to distribute, collect and enter important data. In D.C., I would need to rely on my relationships with people in the district to analyze movement in benchmark test scores of students with whom we were working throughout the year. We asked the corps members to keep track weekly of tutoring time spent with each student in the class to which they were assigned, and then to enter these logged hours into a database so that the hours spent could be correlated to positive increases in test scores. I had to quickly familiarize myself with this database and also know how to troubleshoot and guide teams in this process—something that I was definitely capable of, but didn’t necessarily have experience doing.

I also managed and distributed surveys: for teachers, for principals, for students and even for corps members. The rigorous surveying schedule and process seek answers to pointed questions about the service City Year is providing, about the relationships that City Year has within a school or community, and about the impact that City Year is making. All of these quantitative and qualitative data are collected and used to inform decision making at headquarters about programming and service on a national scale. On a local level, this meant dealing with a lot of paper and processing. Having to manage a grade book and student-work portfolios certainly lent itself to this task: I kept records of the names of all people we surveyed, whether or not they had returned the surveys, as well as additional information that might help ensure higher completion rates for future surveys (we tend to survey at the beginning, middle and end of the service year).

From here, I would often create monthly or quarterly reports that we used at the site level for many purposes. Teams were excited to get cumulative reports about how many hours they had tutored and how their students were performing based on periodic assessments. As a staff, we used the database entries to measure how teams were performing in relation to one another, as well as whether or not teams and individual corps members needed to adjust their tutoring commitments to hit AmeriCorps goals. When it came to survey data, as a site we would review the cumulative reports to “take our temperature” and try to improve service on a local level. This entire process felt really natural, as I had often used similar systems in discussing grades with individual students, looking at class averages and shifts during team meetings, and using parent conferences as a type of gauge for my progress as a teacher.

From Buckets to Shovels and Dirt:

My Cultivation Process

Within the main components of my job, I found that there were several other skills and techniques that I needed to acquire in order to be successful. Most of these did not come naturally to me. I had to learn youth-management skills and, although I had entered the job with a strong foundation in work with adolescents, working with youth in the 17-24 year age range proved challenging, then rewarding, then harrowing, and so on. Initially, I stumbled a bit through the ups and downs of working with youth at various stages of development, experience, and education levels—I sensed some crossover with teaching and the need to adapt and respond appropriately, but it was through a foggy lens, like everything seemed familiar but not quite the same as what I was used to.

I found myself reacting to my position as manager much in the same way I would have as a teacher. I had one corps member who had just graduated from high school and was extremely intelligent and driven; however, he often allowed his need for affirmation to hold him back from truly connecting with the kids in his class. Through the year I needed to find ways to encourage him to believe in himself and be driven not for recognition but for what he knew he was capable of—something that I had tried to guide students toward in the past. I learned a lot from

another young corps member who grew up and served at a school that was right in her neighborhood. She did not have much professional experience, yet I could see and hear her passion for her community when I interacted with her. She was always open to feedback and always “kept it real” with me, which I know helped me to be more constructive and honest when it came to coaching my corps members.

Much like my previous teaching experiences, my interactions with corps members—whether the nine on my own team or the larger group of 100—always pushed me out of my comfort zone. In the small challenges that students and corps members presented (either directly or indirectly) lay the greatest opportunities for growth. The organization and its structure were unique in that I was hyper-aware of the ways that it was forming and strengthening me as a coach and mentor, while these were the very same qualities that we were asking the corps members to cultivate and ultimately possess. City Year has a sense of community created inherently in which everyone is expected to strive for greatness, sometimes without even being conscious of it. I loved that I was working to develop—in myself—the same qualities that I was looking for in the corps members; I also loved the sense of unity this process created.

Outside of my interactions and growth with the corps, one of the biggest challenges for me was transitioning from a classroom to an office environment. One of the hardest pieces for me to navigate was the organizational structure and the concepts of “managing up” and “managing across”—terms I had not even heard before. But, much like my participation in a grade-level team or a classroom setting, there is an understanding that everyone involved in the processes at City Year has something at stake and that we have to hold each other accountable in order to make things happen. I learned how to communicate effectively with colleagues and bosses—almost in the way that you discover a student’s learning style, you can discover a person’s “leadership style” or communication style, and adapt accordingly.

Planting Seeds

Little by little I felt myself easing into the role and experiencing multiple layers of growth. I started feeling confident enough to push through new challenges and

engage in active learning. I realized about halfway through the year that I had been so consumed with learning and absorbing all of the skills and assets that I did not yet possess that I had forgotten to infuse my work with what I *did* know and what I *could* bring. Through my regular check-in meetings with my boss, I expressed my desire to use more of my education experience and knowledge on a daily basis. At this point, I became involved in D.C. Public Schools' (DCPS) meetings and began to rework many of our training modules for the corps. Many of my "early successes" can be linked directly back to what I knew or felt comfortable with already in teaching.

Feeling empowered by my renewed connection to education, I started several projects aimed directly at supporting the corps members in their school service. Working in what had been labeled as some of the most challenged schools in the country (in terms of academic achievement, attendance, and behavior), corps members at City Year often struggle with feeling frustrated or unprepared to work successfully with the students. I began to compile these sentiments and came to a realization that these young, idealistic young people were internalizing much of the anxiety that new teachers feel: not having behavior down, wondering if tutoring sessions were effective, becoming overly-emotionally connected to students, and so on.

The fact is, City Year is not a professional teacher preparation organization, but instead seeks to fill a space in existing classrooms and schools by providing support to teachers and running lunchtime, before-, and after-school programs. That the corps members wanted to be "ready" for service and to perform as a teacher might speak a lot to their level of dedication and love for what they were doing. The key for me at this point was to help them reset expectations and manage their own progress and goals as individuals.

I put a rocking chair in my office with a stuffed animal alligator sitting in it—an old middle school teacher trick—to encourage drop-ins and chats about service and

life in general. I started an advice-column style blog called *Dear Rae* for corps members to write in (anonymously if they so chose) about points of frustration, or to just ask for suggestions on anything from stress management and learning to work with fifth graders to making basic math and fun interesting to a tenth-grade girl.

Along with another program (team) manager, I created a system for classroom observations of each corps member and visited them either in a small group tutoring session or during their whole class support time with their teacher. We created a rubric that reflected the expectations of AmeriCorps and of City Year and used the observations to springboard into great conversations with each corps member about what he or she wanted to improve upon and what the person felt was going really well. This strategy also helped to enhance corps member-teacher relationships, as we elicited feedback and then incorporated it into the larger process.

My initial school visits were rather surreal. While I was conscious of the fact that I was entering what some called the country's most underserved schools, I also saw the same things you see in most schools—kids walking in a line to class, colorful bulletin boards and murals, signs outside of each classroom with the teacher's name and the grade level posted. It felt strange, but seeing all of these similarities just solidified my convictions about education as a human right for all children.

On the surface, there were fewer obvious discrepancies between say, the school in which I taught in Lexington, Massachusetts and one in Southeast D.C.

The fact that most of these students were essentially invisible or part of a statistic—and little more than that to policymakers—encouraged in me a sense of social justice that I had not felt before.

Reading a statistic about a school or a district just made the reality of the students with whom I was interacting in those moments less real: the statistic clumped the students into a group of failures without acknowledging that there are individual lives in the balance and children who would grow up to become

The fact is, City Year is not a professional teacher preparation organization, but instead seeks to fill a space in existing classrooms and schools by providing support to teachers and running lunchtime, before-, and after-school programs.

adults and contribute to a functioning society.

The bonds that I was forming with corps members—and peripherally with their teachers and their students—gave me something that I might never have experienced in my teaching career. Although I had never taught in an urban school, I still felt like I had had an all-encompassing experience with several—from discouraging experiences of corps members to the struggles of teachers and the tough decisions that principals have to make on a regular basis, along with how a school interacts with an external school partner or national organization like City Year. I became very interested in how federal and local policy affects both schools and national service organizations, something I’m not sure I would have pursued had I still had lesson plans to create and essays to grade every night.

Tending the Service Garden

It has been two years since I first walked through the doors of the City Year office. Having recently moved back to Boston, I was glad to stay with the organization as the National Manager of Literacy Initiatives at City Year Headquarters. Keeping my past experience in mind, I now feel even more energized as I enter this new role with so much to learn and so much to still give to the organization.

I feel both an immense admiration for and responsibility to both the corps members with whom I have worked and the teachers with whom the corps members will serve. I imagine myself eventually returning to the classroom and recognize how valuable a corps member would be to my classroom. I can appreciate the commonalities—the long hours, the relationship building, the unparalleled feeling of helping a student to achieve, and the energy required to do it all; moreover, I can also see the huge benefit that having an “ally” in the classroom would bring and the ways I could collaborate with a corps member to enhance my classroom. I can see that the brief time I would put into helping a corps member align his or her tutoring sessions or group work with what I am teaching would be an excellent way to solidify learning and further develop my lessons.

Knowing that a corps member would be working full time with my students across the school year, I can see him or her and my students as true partners in the

classroom—building relationships and making “near-peer” connections, and working together to best help students from multiple directions. With all of the responsibility that comes with teaching, it is encouraging to know that corps members are poised to support the mission of each teacher for the benefit of all students.

I am inspired by corps members—many of whom are much younger than I—who are willing to do something about educational inequity. They are not certified teachers, they are not equipped with education policy degrees, and they don’t all necessarily want to go into an education related field. What makes our corps so incredibly fantastic is their drive to be part of something bigger than one single person, to work in tandem with teachers and support our most underserved students. In that same spirit, I want to watch not just one individual grow but to help the corps flourish and support our nation’s educators; in turn, I hope to witness how entire communities can develop and thrive.

About the Author

Rachael Neuwirth Alexander (ralexander@cityyear.org) graduated from Kalamazoo College and Eastern Michigan University with certification in Secondary English Language and Literature and Visual Arts. She taught in Milwaukee and Lexington, Massachusetts before moving to Washington D.C. Joining City Year in 2008, she has since returned to Boston to work in their headquarters as National Manager of Literacy Initiatives.