

Local Student Engages in a Year of Service Before College

*[Introductory Note: **Anna Boyle** was a member of the student planning committee for the Social Justice Conference with Youth in 2002 and 2003. When she graduated from high school in the spring of 2004, instead of going directly to college, she decided to spend a year in the AmeriCorps program.*



She offered the following explanation of her decision, and her experience.]

In the fall of 2004, I was almost ready to submit finished applications to the few liberal arts colleges that I had selected after months of searching, touring and planning. I felt good about the schools I had chosen. I was excited about the prospect of college and all that it had to offer. College was going to be a great fit for me: I had enjoyed high school very much, and I had always been a successful student. I knew what I wanted to study and what I wanted out of my college experience. I was ready to be more independent but was looking forward to living near my older siblings in the Twin Cities. I was going to expand my horizons, become involved in a new community, and prepare myself for the career and adult life that I had in mind. I was ready to take my education to the next level; this was the perfect next step.

Then, something caught my eye—I'm not sure exactly what the spark was. But I had the sudden realization that my graduation from high school marked the beginning of a brand new period in my life. I became intensely aware that, for the next several years, I was presented with a unique and probably temporary kind of freedom. Unbound by debt, spouse, children, career, or other obligations, I was almost entirely free to go wherever and do whatever I wanted. Some level-headed family and friends suggested that I should put off such ideas until after college, but I became so excited by this new vision that I didn't want to wait. I asked myself if I had even considered that I could choose something other than to attend college immediately after graduation. I had to acknowledge that I had not. (And neither, it seems, do most high school students—especially not the ones who do well at school and who have the means to proceed directly to college.)

I began to research other options, even as I continued with my college application process. College did not cease to be exciting; it was just that I discovered a surprising assortment of other exhilarating adventures. I looked into positions and programs through networks like Americorps, the Student Conservation Association, and the Catholic Network of Volunteer Services.

I found an abundance of potential opportunities that would support me financially while allowing me to live in a new and exciting place and become directly involved in an issue of social justice.

My choices were rural and urban, domestic and international.

Positions were available for young adults of all backgrounds and levels of education.

There were postings that would have placed me in an office, in a school, in a church, in the wilderness, on a construction site, or in a residential care facility.

Many of them also offered some sort of financial education award upon completion of the program.

I selected several programs that interested me most and that offered positions for which I was qualified. After a process of paper applications and phone interviews, I was hired by Casa de Esperanza de los Niños, a private foster care and adoption placement agency in Houston, Texas. I committed to a ten-month contract during which I would work in exchange for housing, health insurance, and a \$500 monthly stipend. I received enthusiastic support from Augsburg College, who agreed to defer my admission until the fall of 2006.



Anna with colleagues and children

(Note: for confidentiality purposes, children's faces cannot be shown)

In September of 2005, I moved to Houston and began working in the “Intake and Assessment Houses” of the agency’s system of foster care. I was one of a small staff responsible for the direct daily care of two households of six children each. Our children were aged birth through six years old and had medical, physical, developmental, psychological and/or emotional special needs, often due to significant abuse or neglect. We, the staff, managed the daily care of the children and of the household. In addition to basic physical and emotional care and housekeeping, this included facilitating in-home therapy, doctor’s appointments, school, advocating for our children to the case workers and legal representatives overseeing their cases, and all other parental duties. As a temporary placement home, we cared for over sixty children during the ten months that I worked in the Intake Houses.

My coworkers were mostly recent college graduates with degrees in psychology, education, and other related fields. I was the youngest and the only intern without a college degree, but with thorough on-site training and a collection of useful personal experiences I soon became aware of the skills and qualities that I brought to our work. As I gained the confidence of my coworkers and supervisors, I came to be as respected and trusted as the other caregivers. Together, we shared the joys, pains, frustrations and victories of our unorthodox familyhood.



A picture of their “familyhood”

Last year, I had an abundance of indispensable experiences. I acquired practical skills of child care. I learned through first-hand encounters about the foster care system, health and medical care programs, the judicial processes of child protection, and other social services. I gained invaluable workplace experience and social skills as an employee of an overwhelmed non-profit organization.

For the first time, I lived away from my family and in an urban neighborhood. I learned to shop for my own groceries, budget my stipend, use public transportation, and care for the apartment I shared with my coworkers. As an enthusiastic fan of music, art, dance, food, and all other sorts of human curiosities, I took advantage of living in a large, diverse, and cosmopolitan city.

In addition to all of this, I left Houston with a little saved money, an Americorps scholarship, several lifetime friendships, an intriguing résumé, a broader picture of the society in which I live, and a new enthusiasm for my looming collegiate venture. In significant but less tangible ways, the year's diversely challenging experiences helped to expose parts of my character and potential that I think would otherwise still be dormant.



The education I received at Casa de Esperanza was not a means to a professional end, but a life experience that motivated and empowered me to be a passionate and engaged citizen of my community.

**Anna with several colleagues,
and her brother Tom, who came to visit**

I have now been home for about five months, and am so happy to be back in Minnesota and once again near to my family and friends. I am a first-year student at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. As planned, I am majoring in Music Education with a focus in vocal music and secondary education. I intend to someday return to the work I did last year as a foster parent.

The choice to go to Houston last year was unique, liberating, rewarding, and empowering. I have not even begun to understand all of the ways in which it has changed me and changed the course of my life. I hope to have other experiences like it in the near future. I believe that, as a group, “college-aged” people are underestimated—most devastatingly by themselves. I am convinced that young adults have something special to offer their communities: independence, idealism, fresh perspective, and energy. **I encourage my peers in and around high school and college to investigate opportunities for full-time service-learning—because it’s good for you, because your community needs you, and because you can!**

Helpful websites that I have explored:

- www.americorps.org (Americorps)
- www.thesca.org (Student Conservation Association)
- www.cnvs.org (Catholic Network of Volunteer Services)