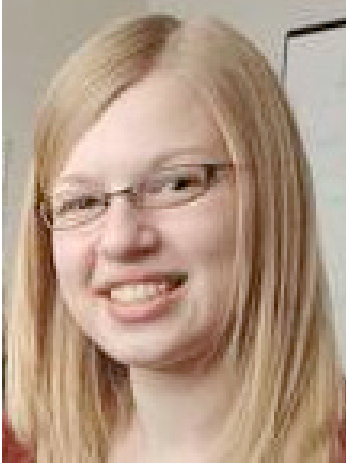


Local Student Explores AmeriCorps While in High School

By Amanda McConkey



(Photo by Paul Middlestaedt, St Cloud Times)

[Introductory Note: Amanda McConkey has been a participant in the planning committee for the Social Justice Conference with Youth for the past two years; and in 10th grade, she co-facilitated the workshop on global poverty/hunger, with her mother Janet.]

Henry David Thoreau once said, “Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life that you have imagined.”

This is a quote I live by. I myself am a person with many dreams, goals, and ambitions.

Some may say my dreams and expectations for myself are unrealistic. Often times, when people are told they can not accomplish something, they become discouraged and end up failing. Not me. When someone tells me I can not do something, I strive to prove them wrong. I have come across many people in my life who think these things to be very unrealistic. While I will admit, some of my ideas are a little out there, I in no way think they are unrealistic.

The First Step – Exploring PSEO

In the spring of 2006 (my junior year in high school), the PSEO (Post Secondary Enrollment Opportunity) advisor from St. Cloud State University came to my school to discuss the program. I had already thought about maybe taking a couple of classes, but I only thought I would be taking maybe one or two. As she began to explain the program, it became very clear to me in my mind, I wanted to do fulltime.

I suppose a lot of this decision was influenced by my parents, but not directly. They both work for non profit organizations. My father is a youth worker with Youth for Christ of Central Minnesota, and my mom is a humanitarian relief worker who is currently the executive director of Kids Against Hunger of Central Minnesota. If you know anything about the non profit world, you would know that it makes up of a lot of hours and not a lot of pay. I absolutely love the work that my parents do. If they did not do all of the service they do, I can honestly say I would not be the person I am today. So it all seemed to fit.

Little did I know that by doing full time PSEO, an opportunity would open up for me that I would have never expected.

The Second Step – Exploring AmeriCorps

In early September 2006, I was at a volunteer fair at SCSU, helping my mom out with a booth for Kids Against Hunger. I decided to walk around and take a look at all of the booths.

I noticed a booth for AmeriCorps. My mom had always said I would enjoy doing AmeriCorps. I had considered for my future as well, but I did not realize that this was something I could do right now.

I was looking through the brochures and soon came to realize you had to be 17 to enter the program. Well at the time, I was only 16 and I did not turn 17 until late October. (My age and grade situation is very messed up. It is very complicated.)

I spoke with Jennifer Heyne, program director for the St. Cloud Corps. She told me to call her back once I turn 17 and we can see if there are any spots left. I said ok and kind of put the thoughts to the back of my mind.

I needed a job, so I was applying at a number of places. I ended up getting a job, but for some reason I turned it down. It is a long story, but ultimately I thought I was going to get a better job than the one I was offered. Well, the one I thought I was going to get ended up falling through. I was very sad after all of this happened and almost gave up hope, but my parents proceeded to remind me that all of this is happening for a reason. They told me something is going to work out that is going to be far greater than I imagined.

When my 17th birthday rolled around, I decided to give Jennifer a call. In our dialogue, she proceeded to tell me they still had three positions left open and they had just decided to switch all of them to part time. This was absolutely perfect because part time was exactly what I wanted to do! I was absolutely ecstatic and realized this was probably meant to be, so I decided to apply for the program.

The Third Step – Working with the United Way

I interviewed at three different service sites, and I was offered a position at two. I accepted a position to serve at United Way of Central Minnesota.

This position just seemed right for me. I look back at it now, and I could not picture myself serving anywhere else. The work environment there is unexplainable. All of the staff members are so kind and friendly. Each one of them truly has a heart for serving people.

My position is the “Success By 6” service outreach coordinator. “Success By 6” is an initiative that focuses on Early Childhood Education. I do a lot with recruiting volunteers to work with young children. I also set up partnerships with local groups and companies, promote the program, and find homes for Imagination

Library books that are sent back because of bad addresses. *[Note: The position involves 20-25 hours per week.]*



Amanda holds Imagination Library Books (Photo by Paul Middlestaedt, St Cloud Times)

Some Lessons Learned from the Experience

My experience with AmeriCorps has influenced my outlook on life tremendously.

As AmeriCorps members, we have trainings every Wednesday morning about various topics, from GLBT to stress management to refugee and immigrants. I have really learned the importance in educating myself on a wide variety of topics. I can choose to be more passionate about one or two issues, and learn as much as I can about those issues; but it is so helpful to have a background of a number of different topics. I have met so many wonderful people throughout my year of service.

All of the people at United Way have shown me what a joy it can be to dedicate your life to serving others. They do so much every single day to find ways in which they can help make someone else's life just a little bit better. They are all very selfless.

My fellow AmeriCorps members have showed me that I am not the only one out there who cares about service. I am a little younger than most of them, but they still treat me as though I am an equal. They take me seriously and truly care about what I have to say. It is so wonderful to see the different perspectives each member brings to the table. They have taught me a lot about really listening to other people's ideas without just focusing on the next thing it is I am going to say.

The people whom I have come in contact with over my year of service have impacted my life more than they could ever know or imagine. I believe that a true servant learns more from the people they are serving than the people they are serving can learn from them.

I volunteered with an income tax assistance program from February to April this year. I met a number of people who truly showed me how no matter what the circumstance of my life is, I should be grateful.

There is one man's story that will always stay with me. He was probably in his forties. Part of my job was to go through this one sheet to find out what forms each person had with them. As I was going through the form, he started to share some of his story with me. He told me that about 14 years ago, while driving in St. Cloud late at night, he was turning a corner, and he was hit by a drunk driver. He was in a coma for a number of days and when he woke up the right side of his body would not work. Ever since then, he has slowly been getting the strength back in his right side. He can function pretty well now, but he told me that he will never be back to the way he was before the accident.

This was such a sad story to me. I felt myself just hurting for him and his situation. Then I looked up at him and I saw him there smiling at me. His face was just beaming. He was the happiest person I have ever met. He didn't let his situation get him down. He was so at peace. He didn't have a worry in the world. I myself tend to worry about everything.

Looking Toward the Future – And Being in the Present

I also think about my future and what my next step is going to be. I have a problem being content with the situation I am in.

Next year, I am going to be going to a school by the name of Eastern University. It is located about 25 minutes outside of Philadelphia. I am so excited to go to school next year. I always tell people I was born to be in college.

It is hard for me to sometimes realize that I am here in this time and place for a reason and I should embrace that as much as I can. Being in AmeriCorps has truly helped me feel as though I do have a purpose for being where I am right now.

Someone once said, "Life isn't about finding yourself, life is about creating yourself."

This is what I hope to do through my AmeriCorps service and my life.

I hope to be able to create myself to be a person who is sensitive to all situations, people, and cultures. I hope to create myself to be a person who lives out what she is passionate for. I hope to create myself to be a person who is content in no matter what situation she is and understands that she is there for a reason. Most of all, I hope to create myself into a truly selfless purpose who lives her life for others. I want to live my life to the fullest and create myself to live life expecting the unexpected.

Some Final Thoughts for Other Students

I truly hope all high school and college age students understand that this is our time.

We are not just the future, we are the now.

Do not just sit around and wait for the world to change. Expect change, take action, and it will come.

Cadet Maxim once said, "**Risk** more than others think is safe. **Care** more than others think is wise. **Dream** more than others think is practical. **Expect** more than others think is possible."

Live. Love. Laugh. Dance. Sing. Dream. Inspire. Life will be fully rewarding if you choose to follow your heart.

Final notes: At 17, Amanda is the youngest person to have done service in the St Cloud area for AmeriCorps, which has been in existence in the area for 4 years.

People doing service for AmeriCorps receive a small living stipend. Once an individual completes the service, they receive an education award that can go toward current tuition, student loans or for future education.