



Stories of Americans With Disabilities in National Service



Americans With Disabilities: Giving Back and Growing at the Same Time

People with disabilities serve for the same reasons as anyone else: to give back to their communities, and to become more active and engaged. Many find that service offers real-life work experience, allowing opportunities to test career paths, sharpen skills, and define employment goals and interests. The individuals profiled here represent a small sampling of the many people with disabilities engaged in national and community service. These stories illustrate the diversity of members with disabilities and their service experiences, and show how a national service experience can contribute to employment.

Dwight Owens

AmeriCorps State: Linking Individuals to Neighborhoods and Communities (LINC)

Collins, Mississippi

Dwight Owens won the 2010 Spirit of Service Award given to an outstanding AmeriCorps member. Dwight served as a member of LINC, where he helped connect people with disabilities with resources and supports to facilitate independence. Dwight

remarks that he was proud to help others to gain independence while working to gain independence himself. In 2005, Dwight was a teacher and football coach when he sustained a spinal-cord injury after being struck by a drunk driver. He says that service increased his self-confidence and taught him he could inspire others through his own struggle for independence. Since his accident, Dwight has used his teaching experience to conduct many presentations in schools, churches, and prisons to discourage drinking and driving. Reflecting on his national service experience, Dwight says, “You can’t help but feel good when you are helping other people smile.” He says his national service experience has helped to develop his own self-awareness that he now uses in his public speaking and advocacy.

Frank Meyer

Volunteer

St. Louis, Missouri

Frank Meyer is a senior who engages in service for organizations across his community, including the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, a local charter school, and the Ronald McDonald House. Frank describes how volunteering has not only given him an opportunity to serve his community, but has also increased his sense of self-worth. Service has even helped his physical wellbeing by keeping him active. Frank’s limited mobility has not curtailed his service to the community. In his many different volunteer positions, he serves as an usher, answers phones, helps to plan community events, and evaluates accessibility for people with disabilities. He was also one of the first bell ringers in St. Louis for the Salvation Army. Frank says he has always been interested in service because he finds it “difficult to spend all [his] time doing nothing...There are really so many things to get into.”

Lise Pace

AmeriCorps VISTA Service: Bosma Enterprises

Indianapolis, Indiana

During her service year, Lise Pace volunteered for Bosma Enterprises, an organization that supports individuals with visual disabilities. Lise, who has retinitis pigmentosa, trained and recruited many volunteers herself. Lise talks about being very shy and uncertain when she began her VISTA service. She thought that her newly acquired disability precluded her from employment entirely. In spite of this, Lise went on to design and implement a volunteer program that allowed people with disabilities to serve in programs such as Habitat for Humanity. After her service year, Lise was hired as a full-time employee for an AmeriCorps program. She is now very comfortable with public speaking. In fact, through the corporate volunteering program, Lise trained volunteers from all levels within the 150-employee company. Lise said of her VISTA experience, “I really was just like a flower that hadn’t been watered...Once I got watered, I just really blossomed and started standing up straighter.” Her service experience improved her confidence and provided an opportunity for her to rejoin the workforce.

Jennifer Wayne Byerly

AmeriCorps State: GRADD Senior Connections

Owensboro, Kentucky

Jennifer Wayne Byerly never imagined that joining AmeriCorps would turn into what she calls “the catalyst to change my life.” Jennifer used her professional experience and the training she received in AmeriCorps to work with organizations including the Red Cross, the Medical Reserve Corps, and the Community Emergency Response Team to help seniors and people with disabilities prepare for disasters and other emergencies. Jennifer became one of the first Red Cross Disaster Response Team members to self-identify as a person with a disability. As a result, she became the first person with a mental health-related disability to serve as a consumer representative on a psychiatric response team. Jennifer credits her experiences in AmeriCorps as contributing to her being awarded a grant that will enable her to, as she says, “do even more service in my rural community.”

Oyo Fummilayo

AmeriCorps State: 21st Century Program

Danville, Kentucky

Oyo Fummilayo was unemployed before she served as a literacy specialist at a middle school. Having previous experience working with teenagers, she specifically chose a middle school because of her passionate belief that pre-teens are at a particularly critical point in their education, when they either become excited about learning or lose interest. Oyo taught the students how to write a newsletter, which they continued after her term of service. She says that her service was a stepping-stone to everything she has done subsequently. Her service experience confirmed what she already suspected: She would find her true career in helping others. After her service, Oyo was appointed to the Kentucky Council on Developmental Disabilities. Her interest in supporting people with disabilities is not because she has a disability but because, she says, “I believe that everybody needs to be included in everything...Everything we do should be available to everybody. It doesn’t matter if you have a disability or not.”

The National Service Inclusion Project and the National Service to Employment Project are funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, and are projects of the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

December 2011