

Volunteer Spotlight - Stephanie Hedges, Allie & Erin

Family Volunteering at the Men's Residential Center

At a recent focus group inviting volunteers to share the impact their experiences have had on themselves and their communities, Stephanie Hedge's story was special. Like many volunteers, she found out about VOA through a friend who recommended our residential programs for hands on experience for her alcohol and drug counseling certification, but she was hesitant.



“I have a lot of mental health and crisis line experience – I’ve seen it all,” Stephanie began. “But I put off volunteering at the Men’s Residential Center (MRC) long-term because I had a preconceived idea, developed mainly by media, about what it might be like.” Then Stephanie pushed herself to volunteer for a one-time project at their annual Alumni Celebration.

“My perception was that as a woman I wouldn’t be accepted, and there would be hostility, but that was totally unfounded. I found the guys to be so gracious, loving, warm, and humble, and I thought, ‘I’ve got to bring my girls to the MRC so they can meet these people; see the work they are doing and experience this sense of family and hope!’” The next time Stephanie volunteered for a project at the MRC, she brought her teenage daughters Allie and Erin with her. They prepared food and decorated for Thanksgiving, and returned for the holidays to help the residents by serving food, wrapping gifts, and playing with their kids.

“This was different from the other times I’ve volunteered because it was so hands on,” Allie shared during a reflection with her mom and sister. “As a teen, you’re already feeling pretty awkward about most things and it’s a bit nerve-wracking, but people said, ‘You’re Stephanie’s kids! Come on in - let’s do this!’ To help people and be accepted is so rewarding. And it was so fun!”

“We got to be immersed in their community, to learn things about them that you wouldn’t know from an outside perspective,” added Erin. “There was always something for me to do and I felt like I was making a difference. I felt lucky I got to do something like that.”

Later that year, residents from the MRC’s Speaker’s Bureau visited Cleveland’s health class to talk about the effects of addiction. Allie and Erin recognized them and told their friends about what great guys they were.

“In my class, I always try to advocate for people who are struggling with addiction,” Allie shared. “After meeting these people, and hearing what they have to say about their lives, you change with them. You try to become this better person. As someone who has heard these things, you have to say something about what’s going on.”

“We’re only one step removed at any time,” Stephanie agreed. “Through experience, the separation fades, and you feel that sense of belonging and kinship. It looks like we are helping them, but we all get something from each other.” That sense of connection Stephanie felt within the MRC’s recovery community was exactly what she wanted her daughters to experience.

“The program is really effective, the participants are part of the process, and the families are part of the process, and I wanted my daughters to come in and see people putting in hard work. It was a big deal for them to feel that sense of family, partnership, commitment, and connectedness. It stuck with them for days and for teenagers that’s pretty impressive – that there’s an outside influence that impacts them.”

“My mind has been opened,” Stephanie reflected, “not so much in how I view other people, but my perception of how other people view me. I want people to see that genuineness in me and to connect on that more human level rather than carrying a lot of baggage or stereotypes or misinformation. I realized that I had been wrong about the MRC, and that I could be wrong about other things.”

“Have a very open mind,” Erin advised anyone who is considering volunteering with a new community. “And get prepared to do stuff, because you’re going to be doing stuff!” added A Allie. “These people are people, they have life experiences, and some of them are really similar to you.”

“I have met some people there who will change the world because they’ve been down and they are grateful,” Stephanie added in closing. “You just don’t know until you meet them how resilient they are. Give them chances to prove to themselves and the world that they have value.”

Thank you, Stephanie, for your willingness to challenge your beliefs, and for your commitment to encouraging your daughters to do the same. Thank you, Allie & Erin, for being such articulate and enthusiastic advocates for recovery. This is exactly how we create strong communities that stand for social justice.

By Nancy Loso, Volunteer Services Manager

