

The World in My Backyard: Service Learning at a Golden Elementary School

By Joni Sanborn '16

What a great way to start the day: being greeted with hugs and smiles. This was my experience twice each week when I volunteered at Shelton Elementary as part of the McBride Service Learning course. At Shelton, I worked with students with learning difficulties. My goal was to inspire them to want to learn—a task that was much harder than I anticipated.

I remember one student in particular. He was having a rare good day; he smiled when I came in and didn't fight about sitting at his desk. We were working through a math word problem, trying to understand the concept of "take away". We tried using our fingers, modeling with blocks, and drawing pictures. Failing to grasp the concept, he eventually gave in to frustration. His eyes welled up. He banged his head repeatedly against his desk. "Why can't I get this to work?" he cried. I learned that the obstinate students were behaving that way not to make my life difficult, but as a way of coping with adversity.

The whole experience opened my eyes to the wider world that exists right here in my community. In my day-to-day life at Mines, I meet very similar people at every turn. They come from reasonably privileged middle-class backgrounds and good schools. They have the means to pursue higher education and they have the wherewithal to earn technical degrees. At Shelton, I encountered a broad community. I interacted with students from economically diverse households. Many were from different cultural backgrounds.

Many also struggled with a variety of scholastic subjects. The experience helped me understand, on a deeper level, what I

to huge groups of 50 to 100 or more. We blend in, we fade to the background. And sometimes we see our problems ignored.

I saw this, too, at Shelton. To energetic and curious children, a class size of 30 is huge. McBride's small seminar courses taught me the importance of having a voice in the classroom, and I wanted the students I tutored to experience the same thing. I did not want them to feel ignored. I did not want them to tune out.

One of the best parts about working with students is seeing tangible results. I saw the children advance in math, reading, and writing. I gained a personal

understanding of their individual difficulties; I tried to help them devise strategies to overcome them. Overtime, many became more sure of their abilities, more comfortable answering questions, more likely to ask for help when they needed it rather than letting their frustrations build.

I also came to appreciate my limits. Over the course of my spring semester as a volunteer, I made little to no progress with the student I mentioned at the beginning. It was sobering. I returned to Shelton to continue volunteering after the summer break and saw cause for hope. I found him completely changed. With a more stable home life and medication to help him focus, he has many more good days. His frustration at difficult math problems has reduced tremendously. He greets me with smiles and hugs: a great way to start the day indeed.



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was studying in the Service Learning class where we focused on the cause and effects of different forms of poverty.

The students at Mines and at Shelton do have something in common, though: large classes that make it easy to get lost in the crowd. Many of our science and engineering courses at Mines are taught