Our Time Together Is Almost Past

by Kathy Raymond

It just seems our year as AmeriCorps members just began. If you look at the calendar though you will see that we soon will finish our term of service. Earlier in the year (February 12th) we had an opportunity to reflect upon what we had done. So let’s think about our past year as a game. We’ll play AmeriCorps Events Bingo. Bingo: B-bonding with newfound friends, I-involving ourselves in events we did not know were available, N-nearing our potential as volunteers, G-going beyond our comfort zones, and O-opening our hearts and minds to such new adventures that we will never again view ourselves as unable to make a difference.

We have found ourselves involved in so many different things to help us to reflect. If you all think back to our first retreat we had fun on our long hike in the frosty woods. Mind you I don’t think any of us expected to be sliding down some snow-covered paths or maybe it was our first opportunity to stretch ourselves between tire swings. I know I wish I were a little more coordinated. Some of us came away from the woods knowing we had faced a challenge head on and succeeded.

As a group, we built towers, moved cans using strings attached to a rubber band and of course we wrote down our thoughts about AmeriCorps. We had an opportunity to bond as group and to get to know each other a little better.

Now this brings me to our recent reflection time together (May 7th). With a change of scenery and some Illinois history around us, we were able to sit and reflect on this past year together as it comes to a close. I don’t think we expected to know so much about each other by the end of the year or have such an interesting time doing so.

Let’s think back to our palm tree/rabbit/elephant circle. How many times can we get Wayne to hula? Our version of musical chairs made the concept of “how many chairs does it take to hold an AmeriCorps group?” become an interesting question. (One, two-two) I personally didn’t realize how much we had done until we gave each other high-fives. It was interesting to see what everyone thought others would be most likely to be.

To bring the day to a close, the super-hero capes were an interesting touch. I came away realizing that you never really know what kind of impressions you make on others. I believe we spent a wonderful day reflecting and having fun together.

As the year-ends and we are in a mad dash to complete all our hours I will be thinking of the hours I have spent with newfound friends. We made a really great group of AmeriCorps members just getting it done!
There is no greater feeling of accomplishment than that which our current AmeriCorps members felt this past April. Each of us who signed up for this weekend knew we would have a challenge in store for us. I don’t think many realize what a challenge this is until they meet the children they are to be with for the day.

I still remember my first year as an AmeriCorps member and feeling overwhelmed when we were told we would be helping children with challenges for the day while their parents (the ones they knew and trusted) were in another area of the hotel. I went home tired and feeling so very lucky to have two healthy children of my own.

The concept behind this weekend is to give the parents an opportunity to learn a few things to help them in their daily lives. They also have a chance to take their family on a mini-vacation with other families, and enjoy the hotel amenities.

Kids are given a buddy for the day. Not only are there AmeriCorps members to help out, but also others from school kids (Milledgeville High School Honor Society and Whiteside Area Vocational Center student) to young adults (nursing students and early childhood students from Sauk Valley Community College) volunteering their time for National Youth Volunteer Day to make sure these children enjoyed the time spent away from their moms and dads. There are games for kids to play, crafts to make, activities inside and outside, a quiet area for those who need time to relax and recharge, shows (a wonderful puppet show featuring puppets with special needs), food and oh so many snacks to eat, throughout the day. I know several of us enjoyed many moments of fun ourselves. By the end of the day most if not all the children and their buddies definitely have an opportunity to bond.

A change this year was having the parents across the street at the Candlelight Inn. It was somewhat easier for the volunteers to keep a handle on exchanges between families, lowering the incidence of separation anxiety. Not all of the children have disabilities, as the siblings are there as well.

I truly believe that this is one of most challenging events we have faced as AmeriCorps members. That being said it has also been one of the most rewarding events I have experienced. It is just another example that through helping the Sauk Valley Interagency Council with another successful “Living with Challenges Weekend” we have helped Get Things Done for our community.

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The Patchwork Quilt
By: Valerie Flournoy

This is a heartwarming story about the closeness of a family. Tanya’s grandmother had started making a patchwork quilt out of scraps of material that had special meaning to members of their family. Tanya became so interested in making quilts; she began to help her grandmother make her “masterpieces.” When her grandmother becomes ill, Tanya and her mother decide to keep working on the quilt. As Grandma starts to feel better, they all work on the quilt together. There is also a special surprise at the end of the story. The Patchwork Quilt is a sweet family story that is well written with pretty illustrations. This story could be used with a multicultural lesson or as an introduction to an art lesson on quilting.

Miss Nelson Is Back
By: James Marshall

This is a short story about a classroom of kids with a teacher named Miss Nelson. Miss Nelson has to be gone the whole week because she has to have her tonsils out. Well, when the cat is away the mice will play. The kids think things will turn out their way, but then a series of unexpected events happen that surprise them all. This would be a great story to go along with a lesson on making predictions. If you like this story, then try Miss Nelson is Missing and Miss Nelson Has a Field Day.

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Quotable Quote: Look at a day when you are supremely satisfied at the end. It’s not a day when you lounge around doing nothing; it’s when you had everything to do, and you’ve done it.
~ Margaret Thatcher~
The duck race held on April 16th was an interesting experience. We had a lot of participation from our AmeriCorps members at this event, plus it turned out to be a gorgeous day at Lawrence Park in Sterling. It was a nice laid-back atmosphere as Wayne Richards can attest to as he floated comfortably in his raft while most of us were wading in frigid cold water of the Rock River. The water took a little getting used to, but before we knew it 575 ducks were coasting down the river to all be safely netted by the waiting net carriers. All in all it took only a short thirty minutes, but it was thirty minutes of fun in the sun for a great cause. This year we raised $2875 for the Literacy Is Fun For Everyone (LIFE) Program so they can continue to get books in the hands of kids. AmeriCorps was once again successful in helping to Get Things Done for LIFE. (Quacks to you who helped achieve this goal.)

The World Year of Physics Science Fair held April 30th at SVCC was fun not only for the kids but also for the adults in attendance. There were lots of tables with different scientific demonstrations and hands-on activities to see throughout the lower level of the college. AmeriCorps members were there to help demonstrate some of the experiments/activities; others were there to help meet, greet, and guide people to the events they were involved in or were interested in seeing.

There were several programs and workshops for everyone to go to. You could make slime, build a solar UFO, or make a stomp rocket, just to name a view of the events happening at the Science Fair. One program of interest to many was Mr. Freeze; a guy that came in to show everyone how different kinds of items reacted when frozen. After his show he set up a stand and froze marshmallows for the kids to eat. (I tried it; they didn’t taste very good to me.) Kids really enjoyed this program.

There was an activity where you could control sound by just moving your hand closer to it or further away from it. Another demonstration of interest was one that tested your reaction time (mine was really bad). There was even an Einstein Look-Alike Contest at the Science Fair.

The most enjoyable part of the Science Fair to me was the bed of nails. There was a woman who laid down on a bed of nails and then they placed another layer of nails on her, and then a cement block was placed on top of that. Someone then broke the block on top of her with a sledge hammer. The woman walked away from it unharmed. The World Year of Physics Science Fair ended with an Egg Drop Contest from the upper balcony level with several of the contestant’s eggs actually making it from above without being broken. I would say that this Science Fair with over 300 plus kids and adults was a huge success.

Bowling For Kids’ Sake & AmeriCorps Meets a New Member
by Justin Swift

The Bowling For Kids’ Sake event held at Plum Hollow Lanes in Dixon on March 6th brought about an opportunity for several AmeriCorps members to donate their time and talents to bowl for a good cause - Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

AmeriCorps members Erin Hartman, Katie Mickelson, Brenna Madding, Justin Swift, Kathy Raymond, Amanda Sanders, Becky Marchek, Jennifer Miller, Sandy Kirk, and new member Chris Lybarger bowled two (grueling for some) games. I sat down with Chris (who is a good friend) and asked him a few questions about his first experience as an official AmeriCorps member volunteering to bowl for this event. He stated that he enjoyed the experience but was a bit nervous.

Big Brothers/Big Sisters was able to raise $25,000 at this event. Our team of AmeriCorps members were able to raise $430 for BB/BS. A job well done, even if we were not the best bowlers there, we were able to bowl for the kids’ sake!

Special thanks to this year’s newsletter committee:
Editor - Kathy Raymond, second year member.
Contributing Writers –
Trudie Flaningam, Second Year Member;
Erin Hartman; Abi Hooks; and Justin Swift
Those who did not go with us on the end of the year trip really missed out. We had a great time. We went to Conklin’s Barn II, a dinner theatre in Goodfield, IL. It was a long drive, but it was definitely worth it. The play was hilarious. It was about Jerry Sloan, a successful jingle writer and his wife Alice, a lawyer. Alice’s father, Abe, lives with the couple. When Jerry’s mother, Mildred, has a fire at her house, she has nowhere to go, so she moves in. To say the least, Abe and Mildred have never gotten along. Throughout the play they are constantly picking at each other and causing conflict. It was one amazing confrontation after another. Marshal Lipkin and Mary Simon played the roles of Abe and Mildred brilliantly. After the play we had another long ride home. We didn’t get back to Sauk until after 1:00 a.m. Needless to say, we were exhausted, but we all really enjoyed the experience.