Taya Derun

April 24th, 2011

Integrational Computing 22520

Jean Coppola

My Experience at the Henry Street Center

My reason for wanting to work with and help seniors stems from the murder of my grandmother. I've lived in America since I was six years old; we actually came to the states on my birthday. I used to visit my hometown, Kiev, Ukraine yearly during the summer. However, after seventeen, I stopped coming for what I now view as juvenile reasons, such as: I had a new boyfriend whom I didn't want to leave for a month or I had high paying bartending or modeling gigs that I didn't want to pass up, or the worst one of all: I wanted to spend my summer at the beach which a visit to Ukraine couldn't provide for me.

I was twenty-one years old and it was a hot August day. I was packing for a cruise that I was going on with my parents and close friend. My biggest concern that morning was which bikini to pack, along with cute sandals. It was around 11 A.M. when I received the call that would alter my life and its perception forever. It was an elderly lady calling to notify my father that his mother had died. You see, this was an elderly grandmother calling; my grandmother was by no means elderly. She was an athlete who ran at least three miles per day, ate healthy food and made her own skin-care products. She was way too early for her death.

The elderly woman on the phone informed us that there had been a fire and my grandmother was in the apartment. This wasn't even the most shocking news; the woman then proceeded to tell us that the young couple that my grandmother had living in one of the rooms in her apartment (I'm positive that she took them in simply because she was lonely), had actually set the fire after they stole her money which was literally hidden in her mattress; because she was like many other Ukrainian senior citizens who believed that keeping money in the bank was unsafe because of the country's difficult and unstable economic past.

That morning, our cruise was canceled and my parents were on their way to Kiev to try and figure out how to go about the investigation as well as all of the legalities with the apartment. There I was, alone in my house crying for days since I couldn't face going to Ukraine with my parents and dealing with the horror that had occurred. I have so much guilt and sadness in regards to my grandmother; but most importantly, I felt extremely sorry for her; not just for how she died, but for being alone for so many years.

I began this class without a clue as to what I was getting into. I was excited about working with seniors. However, I must admit that I was a bit nervous. I envisioned seniors lined up with a million questions to many of which I had no answers. Despite my knowledge of computers, I was afraid that there would be something that I didn't know and therefore, not be able to teach my paired seniors properly.

My initial meeting with the seniors at the Henry Street center was in many ways overwhelming. There were numerous seniors asking questions and I didn't want to neglect anyone. Furthermore, the center is quite far from Pace in a not-so-safe neighborhood. As my visits to the center continued, I became more involved and eager to return.

With each visit to the Henry Street center, I gained a greater appreciation for the seniors and even managed to make a few friends. The senior that stood out to me the most is named Dina. She is a former English teacher and editor. She is full of life and wisdom. At every meeting with her, we both learned a great deal. I showed her tricks and shortcuts of the Internet and she showed me that you can still be active, social and dating at any age. Several sessions with Dina were spent primarily on re-vamping her online dating profiles. Despite being 63, Dina dates frequently. I was more than happy to help her put herself out there in her best light. I had a wonderful time with her and will continue to communicate with her and visit.

The graduation ceremony at the Henry Street senior center was so much more than I could have ever anticipated. Even though two of the seniors who I worked closely with weren't there, the rest of the sweet seniors definitely made up for it. They were all so receptive and kind. They are the most grateful and eager group of people I've ever met. We spoke about everything during the party, from family to health. I even had the wonderful opportunity to have lunch with them. They really appreciated us being there and we showed them our appreciation in return. I believe that I learned more from them than they did from me. I feel truly blessed for having the opportunity to have worked with these lovely people and I will come back at least once a month.

One of the most valuable lessons that I gained from working with the older adults at the Henry Street center was that seniors aren't so different from us; they simply have a lot more life experience. Teaching computers to the seniors has not only taught me to be a better teacher, but it has showed me how to be a better learner. I cannot begin to express how gratifying simply speaking to some of the wonderful people was. Åfter this class is over, I intend to continue to do volunteer work for older adults. Lastly, this class has helped me finalize my decision on pursuing a career working with elderly and terminally ill patients. This experience was incredible and I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.