

## **Service Learning Project Final Reflection**

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This spring semester I had the amazing opportunity and privilege to volunteer for an organization called ESP Inc.. ESP stands for Extra Special People and they were founded in 1986 just down the road from Athens in Watkinsville, Georgia. ESP was created to create a supporting community for all individuals of all abilities under the sun. The founder was Martha Wyllie and when she decided to found ESP in 1986 she had “noticed [that there was] an unequal amount of opportunities being presented to children with disabilities and decided she would be the change she wanted to see” (ESP website). ESP’s purpose is to give all individuals with disabilities and their families a place where they can be themselves and focus on their abilities instead of their disabilities. Extra Special People has “envisioned a world where every person of every ability, in every community has universal access to transformative experiences” (ESP website) for their vision. Their mission for ESP is that it “exists to create [these] transformative experiences for people with disabilities and their families, changing communities for the better” (ESP website). ESP “empowers families of all abilities with three opportunities” (ESP website) to be involved. These three opportunities include 360, Java Joy, and Hooray. 360 is an afterschool program “empowered by ESP [that] sparks connection through wrap-around programs to *enrich* the lives of people of all abilities and their families” (ESP website). Java Joy is a mobile coffee cart that employs individuals who participate at ESP allowing them to serve coffee to the community and it is “empowered by ESP [that] spreads unmatched joy through moments of *engagement* with people of all abilities” (ESP website). Hooray is the “first-ever universally accessible space used for overnight camps, respite weekends, and play for the whole community” (ESP website). Hooray is also “empowered by ESP [and it] welcomes people of all abilities and their families to a place of belonging where they [can] *experience* boundless adventure. The individuals that are being served at ESP Inc. are individuals with all disabilities and abilities in the Athens, Atlanta,

Rome, Gainesville, and soon to be Savannah and Augusta areas in Georgia. Throughout the state of Georgia 38 counties, 693 families, 727 individuals, and participants from 5 other states are being served by ESP as of 2021 (ESP website). The abilities that are being served are Autism, Down Syndrome, Genetic Mutations, Cerebral Palsy, Intellectual Disabilities, and many others (ESP website).

At ESP this semester I volunteered as a swim buddy for the ESP swim team, ESP Athens: Piranhas Swim Team. Starting on Wednesday, January 25, 2023 from 3:30-5:30pm at the YWCO in Athens, Georgia, I went every week to volunteer. However on January 25, 2023 I was sick, so I unfortunately was sad to miss the first day, but that made the following week a fun day since I was getting to meet all the volunteers, interns, and participants for the first time. Each week we would get to the YWCO and wait in a hall for all the interns, volunteers, and participants to get there. Once 4pm hit, we would walk onto the pool deck and get ready to swim for the next hour. Every week would be slightly different depending on what we did in the pool. Some weeks we would get in the pool and swim (all strokes: freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, and butterfly) laps with our buddies and others we would chill at one of the ends of the lanes and get to know more about our new friends (either the other volunteers, interns, or participants) and then swim some laps. However, on the last day of the semester on Wednesday, April 19, 2023, (so many emotions were going through on this day), the interns gave all the volunteers a goodie bag with an ESP Hip Hip Hooray t-shirt, kiddie goggles that had varying animals (walrus, shark, and flamingo), and two water balls. So once we got into the pool on the last day of the semester, we all swam a few laps and then some of the participants were throwing and tossing a ball across the pool. We then all (volunteers, interns, and participants) decided to stop swimming and get into a circle in the 3 feet area and play catch with the ball. It was so fun and rewarding seeing the

participants having a time of their lives. Seeing them laugh and smile just lit up my world and made my day. Then every week once we were done swimming around 4:50pm we would go swim our cool down lap and get out to go get changed. In the women's locker room was where we had some fun memories. We would all talk about our weeks and the new girl talk that came up in the volunteers, interns, and participants lives from each week. Some things that we all talked about would be everyone's highs and lows of the week, any vacations the participants went on with their families, food we would be eating for dinner, and even learned that one of the participants lives by herself with her cat (which I thought was so fun). After the locker room, we walked to the basketball gym, where we would all hang out and play basketball, volleyball, frisbee, football, or just converse with each other until each participant's parent came to pick them up. Later into the semester when it got hotter, we would go outside to the playground instead and would swing on the swings, play volleyball, football, or frisbee, and just talk around the tables.

Through this semester of volunteering at ESP for their Piranhas swim team I learned many valuable lessons that I will be able to apply to my professional career. I got to observe how now matter what disability an individual has, participants at ESP are not characterized by that disability, but rather from their abilities. My role as a volunteer at ESP this semester was to be a friend to the individuals and get to know them as one of my friends and not look down on them as they aren't valued, because they are VALUED and human beings who make this world a better and brighter place to be in. As mentioned earlier, in 1986 there was a problem with an "unequal amount of opportunities being presented to children [and adults] with disabilities" (ESP website), but since 1986, ESP has been able to give opportunities to individuals with a wide range of disabilities (abilities). My initial expectations were to keep an open mind, because I

never knew that I would be able to gain friends from this volunteering experience. After this semester, I have gained life long memories, a sense of better purpose than just myself and my life goals but other individuals life goals and purpose, a sense of belonging into this community of selfless people giving back to the community, and many more. By being a mentor to an individual at ESP I was able to get out of my comfort zone and get to know someone new and become their new friend. Because of my service-learning project, I have been able to give back to a community of people that want to live their lives to the fullest, no matter what disability (abilities) they have. I believe that what ESP does with seeing ability instead of someone's disability has affected the way that I have started to view the world, because while growing up I struggled with my Autism and not being able to make friends as easily as it may be now. I used to fixate on my disability and how it made it difficult for me to make friends, but if I had focused on my abilities to be loyal, trustworthy, kind, caring, optimistic, and the energetic person I am today. If I had known about ESP when I was younger or at least their purpose of focusing on individuals abilities and not their disabilities, I think growing up would have been better for me. So now what do I do with the lessons learned from this valuable experience at ESP this semester? One thing that ESP does that I think is amazing is something called a BRAG. This is where a volunteer, intern, or another participant notices another volunteer, intern, or another participant and writes a BRAG to them. A BRAG is "if you catch a volunteer, intern, or another participant doing something exceptional- like trying hard to meet their goals and stretching their abilities, helping another camper of the ESP staff please fill out the BRAG card" (the BRAG card).. At the end of the semester, each volunteer and participant got a BRAG from the interns. Mine was "I caught Charlotte doing their best to...always be the first one here and swim the most out of anyone. So glad you were in our class. You are a joy. Much love the Swimterns." All

I can say is that, after this semester I have been able to see all the amazing things that happen here at ESP, that I want to volunteer again next fall for swimming. I am going to continue volunteering for ESP. Prior to this class I had already been a volunteer for ESP and I told myself that I wanted to volunteer to the Piranhas team and now that I have done it once, I want to do it again until I graduate.