

First Draft

Shewer 1

How should I spend my summer vacation? Many college students have internships or summer jobs. Some travel. I spent last summer volunteering with three nonprofits through Camp Robin Hood.

Camp Robin Hood is a hands-on summer crash course in New York City nonprofit organizations. Every week, I worked at a different nonprofit: a day care center, a homeless shelter, and a transitional lifestyle program for ex-convicts and former addicts. At every organization, I learned something about working with the underprivileged, but at the end of the summer, I realized that I had also learned something about myself.

I began by working at Ready, Willing & Able, where ex-convicts and former addicts clean streets as part of a transitional lifestyle program. I'll never forget the street cleaning attendant I worked with there. Seymour was tall, tattooed, and a former addict. He was also calm and completely at ease in his RWA jumpsuit, sweeping the sidewalks and wheeling a huge blue trash can through the streets. Seymour taught me how to drain gutters by diverting the flow of water with a rolled up towel. He also taught me to "read" the back stories in the litter. It was like he saw a story in every piece of trash: a schoolgirl who discarded a bracelet in a temper tantrum, a closet eater who ate Twinkies in the street. He talked about his family, too, and his dreams and plans. I grew to respect him and admire his perseverance and determination, despite all the setbacks in his life.

That respect and admiration was something I would come to feel at each of the non-profits. At the Association to Benefit Children, an organization that provides services to underprivileged

children, I played with and taught children who had many challenges. Like any kids, they loved singing, fingerpainting, and playing with toys. But there was no escaping the fact that these activities didn't always come easily to them. They worked hard for what they wanted. It was impossible not to admire their determination.

At a homeless shelter, where I handed out clean clothes and tickets for showers, I met people from every walk of life. Some had addiction problems or other illnesses, but many had simply fallen on hard times. The loss of a job or an unexpected medical problem ended up costing them their homes, and they had nowhere else to go. I spent many evenings talking to one woman in particular, Elsie. She had been homeless for several years and knew the streets of New York better than anyone I've ever met. She knew which restaurants would give out their leftover food and when you should appear at their back door for dinner. She knew which churches had the best soup kitchens, and which shelters were safest, and where to find the best cast-off clothing. I never found out how she'd become homeless, but she'd figured out the system and made it work for her. Although I grew up in New York City, her street smarts made me feel like I'd never really known the city.

I volunteered for Camp Robin Hood because I wanted to give something back. I know that my upbringing has been privileged, and I've been lucky to have never gone without. I wanted to do something for those who weren't so lucky. But I discovered that while I may have more tangible goods than those I was volunteering to help, they had a lot to teach me about the

intangible: qualities like perseverance, determination, optimism and cheerfulness no matter what the circumstances. They taught me that I have a lot to learn.

Second Draft

Shewer 4

Ready, Willing, and Able

July is stifling in New York City, and I was not looking forward to wearing an oversized jumpsuit in the ninety-degree heat. I was suited up to clean streets as part of the Camp Robin Hood program. I was at the headquarters of Ready, Willing & Able. Most RWA employees are ex-convicts or former addicts for whom street cleaning is both a job and part of a transitional lifestyle program.

The program coordinator waved me towards a tall man who had apparently been waiting for me. His name was Seymour, and he was the street cleaning attendant I would be working with all day. As he reached out to shake my hand, I noticed that he had a tattoo on his forearm.

We headed out to the street, and while I fidgeted with the broom I carried, Seymour calmly wheeled a bright blue trash can behind him. As we began sweeping the sidewalks, Seymour not only showed me how to drain the gutters, he talked about who might have dropped certain kinds of trash and why and told me about his family and his desire to get his life back on track. Though I had lived in the city my entire life, I began to see things in a new light. I became so absorbed in Seymour's stories that I heard some girls laughing and almost didn't realize they were laughing at me. "I wonder what she did to deserve that!"

I looked up and saw a group of girls about my age laughing at me as they walked past. They obviously thought I was serving a juvenile court sentence. Ordinarily I may have laughed at the idea that I could be mistaken for a juvenile delinquent, but on this day I felt butterflies in my stomach.

What if Seymour thought I was just like those other girls? What if he thought I didn't want to be there and was counting down the minutes until the day would be over? I wanted to tell him that I had a lot of respect for his work and that I knew I couldn't possibly understand what he does just by shadowing him for a day. I wanted to tell him that I was not simply doing a day of community service so I could include it on a job résumé.

But Seymour broke the silence, saying, "Put some muscle in it, Goldilocks."

Final Draft

Shewer 6

Ready, Willing, and Able

Wearing a canvas jumpsuit zipped up to my neck, I must have looked as though I was stepping onto the set of *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*, but my actual destination was Madison Avenue, home to some of the fanciest boutiques in New York City. The bright blue jumpsuit I wore was far from high fashion: it was sized for a full-grown man, and it ballooned about my slender frame. My blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and the only label I displayed was the bold-lettered logo on my back: Ready, Willing & Able. I was suited up to collect trash from the sidewalks of New York.

• Introduction

July is stifling in New York City, and I was not looking forward to wearing the oversized jumpsuit in the ninety-degree heat. As I made my way through the Ready, Willing & Able (RWA) headquarters, I passed colorfully decorated bulletin boards bearing smiley-faced reminders: “Drug testing is on Monday!” “Curfew is midnight!” Most fulltime employees of RWA are ex-convicts or former addicts for whom street cleaning is the work-for-housing component of a transitional lifestyle program. For me, street cleaning was day one of Camp Robin Hood, a hands-on summer crash course in New York non-profit organizations. As I selected a broom from the supply closet, I reminded myself that I had volunteered to do this. Feeling like a new kid on the first day of school, I stood nervously next to the program supervisor who would be introducing me to the street cleaning attendant I would be helping.

• Beginning of narrative: the first day

If I was the awkward new kid, the street cleaning attendant to whom I was assigned, a tall man named Seymour, was

undoubtedly the Big Man on Campus. Seymour wore his RWA cap slightly askew, and, as he reached out to shake my hand, I caught a glimpse of a tattoo under his sleeve. We headed out to the street together, and, while I nervously fidgeted with the broom I carried, he calmly wheeled a bright blue trash can behind him. Seymour began sweeping the sidewalks, and I followed his lead. He not only showed me how to drain the gutters, he also taught me how to “read” the back stories in the litter. To Seymour, a torn hemp bracelet on the curb was a schoolgirl’s temper tantrum; a Twinkie wrapper in the street was a closet eater’s discarded evidence. Though I have lived in New York my entire life, I began to see my surroundings in a new light. The streets that had always felt so familiar seemed full of surprises. As our afternoon continued, Seymour also told me stories about his sister, his desire to get his life back on track after some time on the wrong side of the law, his love of Central Park, and his aspiration to travel across the country.

Description of key character, with concrete details

After several hours, I had more or less forgotten about my tent-sized, RWA jumpsuit when suddenly I heard someone laughing at me: “I wonder what *she* did to deserve *that*!”

Dialogue and climax of narrative

I looked up and saw a group of girls my age looking in my direction and laughing as they walked past. My stomach tightened. They obviously thought I was being punished, perhaps serving a juvenile court sentence. Ordinarily I might have laughed at the idea that I could be mistaken for a juvenile delinquent, but on this day I felt a jumble of feelings—panic, shame, sadness, and admiration for a man whose history is suggested by his jumpsuit and the logo on his back. I will admit that a few hours earlier I was

Effect of incident

embarrassed about my ill-fitting uniform. Halfway through the work day, however, the girls' rude comments caused an entirely different kind of shame: What if Seymour thought I was anything like those girls? What if he thought that I was faking a smile and counting down the minutes until the day was over?

Thesis indicated indirectly

I suddenly wanted to thank Seymour for this experience. I wanted to tell him that he was probably the best guide through these streets I had ever had, and that I knew I could not possibly understand what he does by shadowing him for a day in a borrowed uniform. I wanted to explain to him that I volunteer regularly in New York: I am committed to working with at-risk children, and have done so for years at an after-school program in Harlem. I wanted to share how much I relate to his closeness with his family, his desire to travel, and his love of Strawberry Fields in Central Park. But the girls' mocking comments and laughter had left us in an uncomfortable silence, and I felt that anything I might say would make us feel even more awkward.

Significance of narrative

It was Seymour who broke this silence. As I stood next to the trash can and tried to avoid staring off in the direction of the latte-carrying girls, Seymour caught my eye, smiled and nodded towards my broom with one excellent piece of advice: "Put some muscle in it, Goldilocks."

Conclusion with dialogue

"Ready, Willing, and Able." Copyright © 2009 by Zoe Shewer. Reprinted by permission of the author.