

## FUMCO youth volunteer, Ava Lane's IDignity experience.



I decided to go to IDignity after Justin, our Associate Youth Director, guilted all the newly graduated seniors into signing up. Honestly, I was dreading it. The first day of summer vacation and I was up at 6:30 AM to “make a difference in the lives of the homeless - one ID at a time“. I had done a lot of volunteer work in my time in the Youth Group, and the one thing I knew I wasn't good at was working with people. Coughing out the dreaded ‘small talk’ was hard for me, so I wasn't sure how much help I would be. I also thought the process probably needed lawyers or notaries or at least capable adults who had more than a high school education to be of any use. But I showed up nonetheless, ready to serve my 8 hours and go home.

I walked tentatively into the building and realized I had forgotten to register for a position. A kindly woman told me it wasn't a big deal. “It's OK dear, just go see Michael the Program Director. He will find a job for you.” The hard part was tracking him down. He is in constant conversation and/or motion for the entire time he's at IDignity. I found him the same time as a man with a more pressing problem: the clients were getting restless. Michael turned to me, “Want to go into the heat?” “Sure!” I replied. I was terrified.

“The heat” was two steps outside: cranky people in a long line. Michael needed to reassure one angry man; but, when the crowd saw his red shirt that signifies authority at IDignity (mine was blue), several others mobbed him hoping for attention to their individual needs. I stood silently at Michael's side, smiling for lack of anything more useful to offer.

Michael assigned me to the job of “Intake”, or filling out some basic background information with the clients, as well as the forms they'll need to get IDs and Birth Certificates. It takes a little bravery to look someone in the eye and ask “How long have you been homeless?” They shake their head, they look at a spot beyond your left shoulder, and they give their answer. 2 days, 6 months, 10 years. I met all types of people, and learned so much about them just by fitting their life into the little blanks. One man taught me the difference between a guy's “girlfriends” and his “*lady*”, another could not remember the last time he had a home. Many answered the question “Where did you sleep last night?” with “Out front on the sidewalk!” which is unfortunately necessary as they are trying to get a good spot in line. While IDignity is able to serve over 200 clients per event, there is often twice that many in line when the event opens.

Prior to IDignity, I had been led to believe that homeless people were to be avoided or ignored for my own safety. Yet, now I was not just paying attention to them, I had all my attention focused on them. What I found was that of all people, the homeless least deserves our ignorance. Why would the people who need the most help be the people we pay the least attention to?

When the day was done I was pleasantly worn out. Some of the other volunteers asked me, “See you next month?” and I surprised myself with the certainty of my answer, “Of course”! A volunteering experience had finally made me doubt my mantra of “I don't work with people”. IDignity is simply people serving people, with efficiency and ease. I feel comfortable there because everyone is on the same level, just some are in need for the time being and some are helping for the time being. And the mint brownies are nice, too.