

2010 TRACIE JOY MCBRIDE QUALITY OF LIFE AWARD

Liz Abbas, Miss City of Lakes 2010

How do you serve your community? How has your work improved the quality of life for others?

I find it important to first state *why* I serve. I've been blessed with phenomenal parents who have modeled community service in a way that it has become innate. They have instilled in me that it is a privilege to share my skills and talents to better the lives of others.

Now to answer *how*, I have served as: a cheerful grilled cheese sandwich server, a canned food organizer, a purposeful event planner, an Olympic athlete fan, a soulful vocalist, a fervent fundraiser, a welcoming upperclassman, a grateful speaker and a college planning mentor. As you can see I have developed quite the gamut of skills.

I serve my community by doing what I can, if that be using my organization skills to plan an event or organizing the food shelf; using my voice to cheer for Special Olympics athletes or singing at church; using my speaking skills to thank donors or talking with students about the importance of college; using my smile to welcome first year students or serving sandwiches at a shelter. I have improved the quality of life of others through planning events but also through sensitive conversations where I've spoken truth into the lives of individuals that did not see themselves as valuable.

As an AmeriCorps member with Admission Possible, I'm mentoring students on their road to college. It is highly likely these students would not be on the road to college without mentors. As these students attend college this fall, I trust they will become a valuable part of their community because I have modeled for them, just as my parents have for me, the importance of giving back to the community. I use my whole heart, brain, and smile to serve others with the belief that it will inspire others to do the same.

What does integrity mean to you? How would others describe how your life exemplifies integrity?

Integrity is a quality that is chosen, a learned skill, developed and tested with each decision made in truth and honesty. I've been told by others that they see me as an authentic person of great integrity because I purposefully refer to truth and honesty in all of my decisions and actions. When I asked my boyfriend how I should approach this essay, he looked up the definition of integrity and said "this should be an easy essay for you to write, you are the epitome of integrity." However, it is challenging for me to articulate. Therefore, I will use my friend's words since the question asks "how would others describe."

Before our college graduation, my six roommates and I described each other, picking one word and explaining why we chose the word. Here are the words they used to describe me: Innovative—"because Liz see's potential where others do not and is able to come up with unique and useful ideas"; Composed—"because even when Liz is stressed out and has a million things going on she is still calm and happy"; Driven—"because when Liz has a goal she will put her sweat, blood, and tears into something to accomplish it"; Empathetic—"because she is able to sense others feelings"; and Insightful—"because Liz is able to see situations from various perspectives to make wise decisions."

I believe the words innovative, composed, driven, empathetic and insightful describe how my life exemplifies integrity.

Describe a situation of adversity that you have faced and how you have used that situation to positively impact the world around you.

I've had personal struggles—bullied in school, struggled with my weight, did poorly on the ACT—but I've found nothing compares to the struggles of the students I work with. The students I work with wake up at 3 a.m. to deliver papers with their mother and then go to school, work three jobs to support their family, participate in many afterschool activities because they want to better their lives and for some of them because they do not have a home to go to. These students deal with the pressure to join gangs, sell drugs and even sell their bodies for money. It sounds like a movie but for these students it is their reality. I believe that we cannot compare our struggles to someone else's and we should not discount our own strife. Rather, we should always recognize our blessings, what we have overcome and how we can use the knowledge we have to empower and encourage others.

When I was a senior in high school I was not facing the challenges these students face each day. However, I was very insecure about my poor ACT score and I did go through the complex college admissions process with difficulty. In retrospect, I know that I should have retaken the ACT, applied for more scholarships and thought more about the financial aid packages I received from different schools. I cannot go back to those days. I have already taken out the student loans and retaking the ACT now would have no impact on my life. What I am doing is helping students make good financial decisions for their college education, I encourage them to retake the ACT and apply for all possible scholarships. What I can do now is pay back my loans and impact other's lives.

Describe what creates “quality” in your own life.

My life can be hectic and sometimes I spread myself too thin. But I do not do anything I cannot handle and I do nothing on my own. My faith supports me through the storms and sunshine of life and I have a supportive network of people who hold me accountable, comfort me in difficult times and congratulate my accomplishments. The quality of my life comes from the people around me and from my internal strength to persist even when I don't want to. My joy comes from the peace of knowing that I am loved by my family and friends and we will be there for each other. Beyond my close relationships, I believe the quality of my life is blessed by the people who pass by me each day. Sometimes our interactions with others seem insignificant but I believe a smile can change someone's day. I find delight connecting these small interactions of life.

When I am stressed and the world has taken its toll on me, I go visit my nieces. Their smiles and giggles help me to remember the potential that is within us all, and how vulnerable we are to the negatively this world sometimes offers us. What creates quality in my life is remaining optimistic and loving the simple things in life. I appreciate the beauty of a sunset and the turning colors of fall as well as the amazing potential in us all.

How do you plan to make service a long-term commitment in your life?

My life will always include service, as I have said it is an innate part of my life and my family. As I prepared for my college graduation I researched full-time service opportunities. When my mother was about my age she served a year as a VISTA, Volunteer in Service to America. AmeriCorps is a part of the Corporation for National & Community Service, which also includes VISTA. AmeriCorps is comparable to a domestic version of the Peace Corps. Currently, I am serving as an AmeriCorps member with Admission Possible in St Paul. To date, I have served over 1,300 hours; planned 2 college fairs that nearly 1,000 students attended, planned 14 college campus visits, and worked directly with over 1,500 students on their road to college.

My AmeriCorps experience has taught me that I have the mind of a business woman with the heart of a social worker. I believe that businesses have a unique ability to impact communities. That is why I am interested in corporate community relations. I am an experienced event planner which is a skill I have developed to serve others. My career goal is to work for a company and collaborate with non-profit organizations and community partners to plan events that will have a positive impact on communities.

I plan to continue mentoring students for college and career planning to remain invested in our collective future. I will continue to stay involved in my church, my alma mater and my hometown because I am who I am because of these communities.