**Author:** Cassie T.

Community service is, I believe, giving a hand in helping around the community.  It is giving your time to help the community without the satisfying payment of money in return.  Community service is so important and such a help when everyone pitches in to complete a project or just give back to the environment.  Also, when someone goes to help and volunteer, they learn more about the world and how it really works.  Without this project I would not have known that VISTA Gardens was a place.  I would not have known that everything they do is just to help others and to provide for others.  They teach kids about sustainable, organic gardening and hope to bring together the people of the Carrollwood community.  I also learned a whole lot about compost and how different bugs help with different plants.  The entire garden is for the benefit of the people and is for the people to grow their own fruits and vegetables.  Even though there might be the blazing sun or the pouring rain that they will work in, the people of the garden still lend a hand to complete projects or help someone else’s garden.  It is all thanks to the amazing people I met that helped me to learn so much about gardening, how to be a better person, and how good it feels to have helped a community.

For the semester, I volunteered at VISTA Gardens.  I went to volunteer there usually on Saturday mornings from 9-11 or however many hours I wanted to work.  On the Saturdays I knew I was going to miss VISTA I would make sure that I would get extra hours on other Saturdays.  I chose to volunteer at VISTA because I heard that there would be a lot of playing in the dirt and I love to just get down and get messy.  It was super relaxing to work and just weed in the shade with the wind blowing- all you could do was appreciate how beautiful nature is.  Another reason I chose to volunteer where I did was because I was going to choose the soup kitchens at first but that seemed so basic since everyone said they were doing it.  This is a project where you meet new people who wanted to go out of there way and do something besides the soup kitchen.  I simply weeded, dug up dirt, sifted dirt, and placed mulch.  Many days near the end of the project were extremely hot and the heat was excruciating.  Multiple water bottles were brought and tan lines in the 3 hours were to the extreme.  During the beginning of the project the weather was a little chilly and you would come dressed in fall clothes but end up sweating because of the work being done.  The projects were not that big but were simple little things like cleaning up the rows between gardens and re-mulching the butterfly garden.  I do believe that the main project was to help the people of the community, so cleaning up the rows between the gardens made sure the weeds did not get into the gardens.

I truly learned a great amount from this experience and met a lot of people.  I will give back even more in the future.  Also, I will help others realize how important and how good it feels to help for free occasionally.  It helps me recognize how important volunteers are because it is not every day a whole community can come together and create a Garden Park while making sure it thrives regularly every single day they possibly can.  Everyone who goes there is not going there for the money or even for the volunteer hours in the end.  The volunteer hours are what brought us there, and we will soon realize what an experience it is to join and meet with strangers to lend a hand.  Thanks to all the other volunteers I met, they made me want to come back even after I finished my hours.  I now want to go there for my Bright Futures hours and for the hours I need to graduate.

Because of everything I have done with others, there is now a thriving butterfly garden, everything looks nicer, and gardens are saved from the weeds growing everywhere.  I want to thank Ms. Petrilak for this project.  I complained at first but now I am appreciating everything that has happened.  I cannot stress enough how important I believe community service is. Also, a special shout out to the adults and volunteers that made my time at VISTA Gardens a great one.

**Author**: Rita B.

Community and service is essential to both society and the individuals contributing to their community by participating in this act. The concept of working for free in order to better one’s community in turn betters the individual by building character and heart. No matter what one chooses to do in some way or form they are helping simply by sacrificing the most precious thing anyone has, their time. Donations of money and materialistic things are very much appreciated but not as valuable as the sacrifice of one’s time and efforts. Community and service is something I personally believe in not only as a requirement but also as a part of life.

My personal experience with community and service was quite pleasant because I chose something I had always been interested in. I chose to volunteer at VISTA Gardens. This is an organization that, as the name suggests, revolves around gardening and being earth friendly. I had started volunteering a little late in the project practically forcing me to fit it into my tight schedule. Most times I had to cancel plans I had looked forward to with my friends for the occasion. Of course, at first, I was unhappy with the whole arrangement but the more I went, the more I realized I quite enjoyed the whole thing. I always knew I liked gardening I just did not think I would like it in the harsh conditions. Being that it was almost always burning hot from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM on a Saturday as well as the fact that most times it was more labor than actual planting. The reality was I liked being outdoors and feeling like I had a purpose. I liked being thanked at the end of the day for my good work. I liked being a part of something that was bettering my community and myself as well. Plus, it was a good workout. It was not all fun, for example pulling weeds was not great, but I’d get to plant a tree and water the vegetables which was rewarding.  Initially, I chose this as my community and service because the location was right by my house making it very convenient, but in the end, I started going not because of the convenience but because I genuinely enjoyed it.

VISTA Gardens is a great organization that has taught me so much in the time I have been there. First off, the name is an acronym that stands for Village Institute for Sustainable Technologies and Agriculture. The agriculture was the part of the organization that I helped with the most. It is also a non-profit organization that does it all for free. Bill West, the president of VISTA gardens said they held back on many of the crop growing until they got their lease approved. To get the funding for such things can be very difficult and takes a lot of effort and dedication, but for VISTA luckily there were people like Mr. West that stood up for the institute and did what was right for their community. I mostly got to go and be a part of such a great thing on Saturdays because most times that is the only day I have off. But I also went once on a Thursday because I knew I could not make it that Saturday. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I did start my project later than most because of my change of heart, therefore I had a lot less time to finish my hours.  As a result, I had just enough times to go and finish my 20 hours and not continue going because of exams that I chose to study for. This was the only thing standing in my way, because otherwise I would have continued to go not only to better my community but for my enjoyment as well.

After this whole experience, the most overwhelming of all feelings that I felt was the feeling of accomplishment. I also felt like I was contributing to something real and helping people plant and continue to nourish they beloved crops that they trusted me with. I also even got to learn a few things there. I had obviously learned how to do the gardening things such as pulling weeds with a tool and making a good spot to plant something, and even how to plant a tree. But the most important lesson I learned was that to never take anything for granted. I had realized the struggles people went through back in the day and even now just to get food and make due, as we today shop in air conditioned facilities complaining about the lines we wait in to pay for our prepackaged and washed food. I know it sounds silly but, in a way, I felt like a farmer and the bit of hardship I felt, was nothing compared to people even today out in the sun doing such labor for a living. Now it is a stretch, but it really was how I saw it and I am so glad this experience made me realize life should not be taken for granted.

The words community and service were automatically associated with requirement for me, that is before I had completed this project. I now feel that community and service is truly a service that benefits all parties involved. I believe that every student should have to and want to be a part of some community that they enjoy and help make a difference no matter how small. Showing up the first day may not be very pleasant but as the days go by you may grow to realize you actually like going and if not then will at least enjoy the fact that you made a difference. I know at least for me, that was the case.