

Speech given by Elon student Erin Keys at the Barbara Jacoby Dinner for Service Learning Faculty on March 2, 2004

My first experience with service learning was in Dr. Peters Intro to Religious Studies class, fall of my freshman year. My placement was at ARISE, a woman's abuse shelter in Durham. When I began my service hours I honestly doubted what I would gain out of the experience, driving to Durham seemed a hassle and the hour requirements daunting. The work we were doing was also very much behind the scenes, "dirty" work that was centered around office paper shredding and moving and cleaning of clothes and toys for the women and their children who sought refuge in this shelter.

Over the course of the semester, it became very evident that these mundane tasks were vital to the organization's survival. What became more valuable to me as a student was the time spent completing these tasks, for it is in those moments that Amanda, the woman who ran the shelter, would chat with us. As I became more comfortable working at ARISE, I gained confidence in asking Amanda about her work and the women who came to the shelter.

I will never forget the night we sat on a couch sorting through old clothes and broken toys, when Amanda began to cry as response to my questioning about the women who came to ARISE. As I saw the passion she held for these women, and felt the need for service from the community, I was moved in a way that still causes me to be passionate about the issue today.

It is this experience and countless others that I took back to the classroom and was able to express what I was observing about the society I live in, the power struggles, the injustice and the places I found God. Through class discussion, reflection papers, and even an art assignment I was able to better grasp what I was witnessing and learning about the society to which I belonged. From this I was better able to understand my own placement within the power struggles that exist in our culture and ways I can institute change.

Working at ARISE is one of the most memorable class experiences I have ever had. With college being a time where we are supposed to be so focused on where we are going in life, to take a step away from that and instead see how I can impact the life of another person, was one of the most impactful learning experiences I've ever had.