

CHRIS UNKRICH

Mohandas Gandhi said, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." This idea is very appropriate today, for in no other time in history than now can service to others accomplish so much.

My name is Christopher Unkrich, and I get great satisfaction in doing service for others. For instance, I raised money to pay for supplies needed by Grace Place, a Catholic organization that provides temporary shelter, hospitality and assistance for women and their families who, for various reasons, are in a life transition. The women are homeless, abused, or otherwise in need of a helping hand. The warm friendly smiles I received when I presented the basket brimming with the Grace Place guest needs was an amazing feeling I will always treasure.

Another organization I volunteered for is Cincinnati TOPSoccer. This is a program which allows children with special needs to experience the joy of playing soccer just as their typical siblings do. TOPSoccer is an all-volunteer organization, and the TOPSoccer coordinator offered me a behind-the-scenes opportunity I gratefully accepted. I was able to work to help prepare for their fall season, in which over 50 kids played. The joy those kids experienced from participating in a team sport was truly reflected in the smiles on every face. The memory of those smiles is priceless to me.

Heifer International is an organization which strives to assist poor and hungry people around the world by providing farm animals to needful families to help them support themselves and become self-reliant. Heifer's goal is to work among the community to help end poverty and starvation and to care for the environment. Helping others help themselves by improving their quality of life is Heifer's strategy. I raised money to purchase a chicken that was donated to a needy family to keep for eggs. This gift improved the recipient's nutrition, and through the sale of their eggs, generated income for their families.

CHRIS UNKRICH

Opportunities for service to others can also be found very close to home. A man named Omer Frey lived up the street. He was a World War II veteran who fought in nine countries and experienced the worst the war could offer. Omer was awarded eight medals for distinguished military service and a Purple Heart for a wound he received in Luxembourg. Omer's eyes would come to life and he would seem rejuvenated when he shared his memories of the war with me. I really enjoyed listening to him bring history to life. He lived alone and, except for occasional visits from family members, was usually by himself. I wanted to show my appreciation for his service to our country, so one Veterans' Day I made a thank-you card for him, gathered up some of my coveted Halloween candy, took it up to his house and spent time with him so he would have some company. I respected Omer and wanted him to feel valued and appreciated as he did in his younger days. It seems that sometimes elderly people feel useless, as though they are just taking up time and space. But I think the time I spent chatting with Omer, helping him rake leaves, pruning his flowers, removing weeds, and putting down mulch in his garden made us both feel special. Unfortunately, Omer passed away in 2006.

Serving at St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish is another way I have made a difference in the lives of people around me. On multiple occasions parishioners as well as priests have approached me smiling with enthusiasm and complimenting me on a job well done. Father Wall, one of our parish priests, once said to me that it is important for the congregation to see young people serving at mass. I think it is because it demonstrates that the younger generation still is willing to make a commitment to something that is important to themselves and others and it gives the older population more faith and confidence in our youth. I report for my duties on time and wake up extra early in the morning to serve the 7:00 a.m. Mass. It is a commitment I make to enable the early risers to get the full mass experience. Serving Jesus at the altar is a powerful

CHRIS UNKRICH

way to live His love.

I suppose I can credit my desire to do service for others to my experience with my grandmother. When I was four years old, Granny came to live with us for a while when she became very ill with bone and liver cancer. Granny had always been independent but began feeling sick in October. By the time she came to live with us the following March, she had been forced to use two canes to walk, then a walker, and finally was bedridden. Granny was scared. At one point she asked, “Do you think I’ll go to heaven?” Granny prayed the rosary daily, and every night we would gather at her bedside for family prayers. People sent flowers and cards to Granny and prepared meals for us so we could spend more quality time with Granny. I learned how important such small acts can be for people in need, because we were the people in need. Thirty-six days after she came to live with us, Granny passed away. I reached up to her and hugged her as tight as I could.

Here’s the thing, one does not have to be an extraordinary person to make a difference. God can be seen in all things. As Mother Teresa once said, “We are all pencils in the hands of God.” Simply lending a helping hand, listening, offering a warm friendly smile or words of encouragement, praying, committing random acts of kindness are but small actions that bring blessings to others just as Aubrey Rose always will.