

Reflections from a veteran educator on the first few months of service with NCCAP AmeriCorps



Jean Abreu

40th "First Day of School as an Educator and 1st as an AmeriCorps Member

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented shift in just about everything. As a veteran educator, this is my 40th year experiencing the 'first day of school'! For 39 of those years, I simply walked into school, organized my classroom and conversed with colleagues, giving little thought to what I touched, how close I stood to others or how many people were standing together in the office. The pandemic has changed all of that.

Returning to school this year has felt like my very first day of Kindergarten where I knew nothing about school logistics and had to learn EVERYTHING anew from how to stand in line to how you hold a pencil. Returning to school this year was an exhausting experience of re-thinking how I do EVERYTHING! I now need to take my temperature first thing every morning, wear a mask into the building, sanitize hands as I walk through the front door, move to my designated work spot which is in a room all by myself, set up my workstation, make sure only 'my' tools are present. I needed to remain 6 feet from others at ALL times and wear the mask anytime I move through the school. I need to remember to sanitize hands when entering/exiting a room, completely clear off my workspace at the end of the day and spray the space with sanitizer. As a staff we need to daily sanitize the commons area where staff share a fridge, microwave, and Keurig machine. And all of THIS was just our focus on the physical logistics of being present and working with fellow staff members! We hadn't even started looking at the logistics of a full-blown on-line classroom.

As a school, we had to figure the detailed logistics for having students present in the building while keeping everyone safe. It has meant re-learning how to approach a student, how to tutor a student, how to continually remind them about social distancing and touching things. We also now need to sanitize anything a student has touched including chairs and tables. On top of all the physical logistics, we've needed to focus on making sure students are ready for on-line learning, check their technology access, trouble-shoot any technology issues, get students comfortable with logging into meetings and submitting work digitally.

It has been a huge energetic push to re-learn how to safely move through a day in the presence of a pandemic!!! I'm pleased to say that I work with a staff who has been very conscientious of safety and supportive of one another as we reshape the way our daily interactions unfold. I found the first three weeks of school absolutely exhausting because of the extensive re-learning of how to 'be' in a working environment. As a staff, I feel we've all got a good handle on our new procedures. It will become a brand-new challenge once we bring students back into the building, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it!

Serving together on Make A Difference Day

It's fall in Wisconsin which means cool, snappy days and trees ablaze with color. It also means that eventually the leaves drop into the yard and need to be raked. This year our AmeriCorps team volunteered to rake the lawns of two elderly women. In a normal year, raking leaves would simply be another task tied to the season. But this is no ordinary year as we grapple with a pandemic which has forced us to change the way we do everything.

Because of the pandemic, face-to-face gatherings and meetings are almost non-existent, and that includes our weekly AmeriCorps meetings which have all been on-line and ZOOM. But we decided to participate in the Make A Difference Day and accepted the responsibility of raking two lawns. Now you can't rake lawns using an on-line platform, so it was a real delight to meet in person at the first house and do the work of raking.

Not only were we efficient rakers, but we had an awfully good time talking and laughing while also minding our social distancing requirement. Each of the elderly women whose yards we raked made a point of coming out to speak with us. Both of them were grateful for the help because their physical health did not allow them to do this kind of work. By the end of the second lawn, we were laughing and cracking jokes about our situation. It felt so good to be laughing and doing some physical activity on a beautiful fall day in Wausau, WI.

Resilience, Innovation, and Celebration in December during a Pandemic

December is typically a month for gatherings, celebrations, shared treats, camaraderie and festive fun. At EEA, December has meant dress-up days, door decorating, holiday lights and an afternoon of fun Holiday activities to break up the routine. For staff, it has meant treats in the lounge, a pot-luck celebration, a white elephant gift exchange and lots of laughs. For AmeriCorps members, it has meant a night out on the town, a silly gift exchange, camaraderie and laughter.

That's what December looked like before the pandemic.

How does a community move through a pandemic in December? I'd like to share with you the ways we've adapted our activities to create a safe yet celebratory atmosphere. How can we bring joy and laughter to one another when we have to mask up and social distance? Here's how:

While our room decorations were non-existent at EEA and students were still attending on alternate days to reduce daily numbers, we still managed to find a way to create celebration. The staff decided to make individual goodie bags for each student. The bags consisted of 5 unfrosted cutout cookies, a small container of frosting and sprinkles, a couple of hot chocolate packets and a pencil! Each gift bag had a card signed by their advisors. I spent an entire day baking the cookies using frozen cutouts from UBake. I made the entire school smell good! We then packaged up the goods. I hand-decorated the cards for my advisory students using stamps and colored pencils. They looked great! Then as students came in for their class time, students were able to take the bags home. We'll porch drop the bags of students who are virtual or who weren't in attendance. It's our way of saying we love you and care about you!!!

The EEA staff usually has a potluck and white elephant gift exchange. It's usually a loud raucous event with lots of laughing and sharing in one of the classrooms. This year, we are still planning for a party! We will create a ZOOM meeting and each staff member will be in their own room. We'll be ordering carry out and eating "together" alone in our rooms! How fun is that? We'll put the white elephant gifts in the commons area and when it's time for someone to select a gift they will step out into the commons area, select the gift, return to their room and open it in front of the camera. Now we'll still have the option of stealing someone else's gift, but the exchange will take place out in the commons area. All in all, it will be great fun!

The AmeriCorps celebration was equally fun and made possible using ZOOM. We shared Christmas memories, guessed the titles of songs and tried to say phrases in Spanish. Then we used the ZOOM whiteboard and with everyone drawing at the same time we created a kind of AmeriCorps Holiday card. It was just a hoot as we laughed at our own and one another's attempts at drawing. Then we played Pictionary using the ZOOM whiteboard. We laughed and laughed and laughed. Boy did that feel good!

Resilience is the word I'd use to describe the way we moved through the month of December in a way that allowed for fun, celebration, laughter, and silliness. We've been learning how to savor the little things in life. I really appreciated all that unfolded during this month of December!