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**Interactive Education**

I met Gladys while she was walking her dog.  A 91-year-old African American woman, she is a retired hotel worker and has lived in her home on Powell Street for the past 40+ years.  During this time Gladys always walked four blocks to the local library to cast her vote.  Although she is registered, Gladys does not drive and does not have the proper state identification that is now required.  She told me “not to worry” because “everybody knows her” at the library so she does not need identification.  I tried to explain the new voter identification law that had passed, and she waved her hand at me.  I was finally able to persuade Gladys to allow a volunteer from the Obama campaign office to drive her to the Registry of Motor Vehicles at her convenience the following week.  She gave me her telephone number, and I noted her address.  Then, buoyed by my success, I moved on to the next home.

My friend and co-volunteer Cody and I, continued going door to door explaining the new law, giving out voter registration cards, and scheduling pick-ups to procure state identification.  As high school seniors studying the “moral obligation of civic responsibility” in our Civics class, we sought to fulfill our ‘obligation’ and have some fun doing it.  During our rounds, however, we were astonished to discover a significant number of the residents in Norristown who did not possess the mandated state identification.  Once, when asked what constituted proper identification, I had replied “a drivers license, a passport…” But when one man guffawed, “Passport! I ain’t got no passport!” I stopped mentioning passports as an option.  Although I did not know what to expect when I signed the volunteer sheet at school, I was surprised by the warm reception we received.  As we knocked on doors, people welcomed us into their homes.  They were exceedingly kind and many were interested in discussing the social and political issues that concerned them.  I remember discussing stem cell research with one woman whose daughter had recently been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.  The people we met that morning were genuinely appreciative of our efforts and wanted to ensure that they were properly registered and could vote. I was encouraged to not simply be learning about the political process in a classroom, but to be a part of it at the grass-roots level.

Later that afternoon Cody and I were stationed outside a supermarket with voter registration cards.  Our goal was to return to the Obama headquarters with as many completed cards as possible.  We noticed that we had more success with young people, so we began to target them as ‘potentials.’  I remember following a unfriendly-looking ‘potential’ wearing earphones, who was desperately trying to avoid me.  I blocked his path, smiled broadly and waved my cards at him.  After he reluctantly admitted that he was unregistered, I implored him to fill out the card, explaining that it was absolutely imperative for him to vote in the upcoming election, especially in his critical ‘swing state.’  “It’s in your hands,” I rebuked him, and cheerfully asserted, “I won’t take *no* for an answer.”  Cody was beside himself with laughter when I returned with the completed card from this ‘unlikely’ voter and incredulously asked how I had succeeded, whereupon I responded with a grin.

Participating directly in the civic process was an extremely gratifying experience. When I was a freshman at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, I remember seeing a poster on the wall of my Graphics Communication classroom.  It displayed a quote that reflected the progressive, non-traditional approach to education that Fieldston espouses: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.”  At that time, I had no tangible experience to substantiate this assertion made by Confucius, but on that day, I appreciated and understood its significance.  It was there, in Norristown, that by ‘doing’ I would come to ‘understand,’ among other things, that I had the ability to effect change.  And for me, acquiring a profound and lasting ‘understanding’ is the ideal form of education.

By registering voters, I gained first-hand experience of how the political process works in the community and nationally. In a Civics class, we had read William Backus Guitteau’s 1913 textbook, *Preparing For Citizenship*, in which he defines the reciprocal relationship between citizen and government as a “living organism.” And on the bus ride home that evening, I felt I understood and agreed with his assessment made almost 100 years ago. The abstract concept of ‘government for the people, and by the people’ became tangible to me through the physical experience of registering voters.  I received a tremendous sense of satisfaction by actively participating in the democratic process, and I felt fortunate and proud to be an American citizen.  Although I frequently watch news programs and read newspapers, magazines and political blogs, learning in this interactive manner was different because it fostered inside me an intellectual curiosity and belief that anything can be possible, even when challenges seem daunting or overwhelming.  I also came to realize that success or failure is secondary, and that ‘trying’ or ‘doing’ is what is fundamentally rewarding.  To my understanding, the learning process can take place anywhere and at any time.  Furthermore, any traditional learning that takes place within the classroom may be profoundly supplemented, or confirmed or repudiated, with educational experiences that occur outside of that environment.  For me, this interactive learning experience was meaningful and connective, and therefore more enduring.