

These past months have been a test of my skills and patience. Being placed in a new setting hundreds of miles away from anything familiar, living with new people and performing tasks that are anything less than routine would make me ask myself, “What exactly did I get myself into?” It was as if I was living in a new country, trying to understand the culture and blend in as much as possible. But as time went by, my reasons for being in ministry made sense: I am here to serve others.

About half of my time is spent at Sacred Heart of Jesus School. There I work with children in the WORD Project which is an after school literacy program. We work on math and reading skills as well as any homework that they need help on.

When I first started working with the kids, I felt as though I had no idea how I would make it through. I had tutored before, but that whole experience had been back in high school where I tutored peers on their math skills. How could I relate to a younger audience? I thought back to a semi-recent time when I had been working with children. I had been a camp counselor one summer and had to deal with a lot more than math problems or diagramming sentences. One bit of advice they had given us was to “think like they do.”

Soon I found myself doing math problems alongside the students and using blocks to help them visually count out numbers. I would try and ask questions that their teachers might ask and help them to narrow down multiple choice reading questions by eliminating the ridiculous answers. And I would admit that math wasn't my favorite subject when I was their age, but that it is a skill that is needed for the rest of their lives. I would help them to see that I used math in everyday life

The days that would test me the most would be when one of the students would complain that they wanted to do something that wasn't school related. Granted, we all have days that we would rather be on a warm beach thousands of miles away or in a warm bed with the blankets pulled over your head, but life goes on and school work and learning are not the ones that wait around. We would take a deep breath, and then decide that we could talk for a few minutes about something really engaging as soon as we finished the work in front of us. And for some reason this seemed to make the “dreaded learning process” seem less intimidating.

Even though I am only halfway through my volunteer year, I feel as though I have learned a great deal, especially from the students. I end up reinventing myself as a mentor as I am constantly seeking new ways to work through homework problems and teaching techniques. The best lessons in patience and understanding are being taught to me each day. I thought it was the students who would do all the learning and growing, however, I am the one being shaped in the process.



*Erin Day, from Appleton, Wisc., helps a student in Grand Rapids to succeed in math at Sacred Heart of Jesus School.*