

Every Friday, 18 medical students take 2 ½ hours out of their study schedule to travel to San Bernardino and mentor at-risk high school students. Why do we, as medical students, take the time out of our schedules? We could be memorizing defects in glycogen metabolism or the myriad characteristics of leukemia and lymphomas. Instead, we are playing basketball with kids, role-playing job interviews, and talking about why “The Pill” won’t stop you from getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Understanding why we take the time out, who are we volunteering for? Our kids have been pulled out of their district public school for behavioral issues and placed in a day school with an extremely structured environment. They earn “points” by good behavior and lose them for bad behavior. They can spend their points on prizes or they can “invest” their points towards graduating and being placed back in a normal school.

Although, undoubtedly every medical student has their own reasons, here’s some of the reasons why I volunteer:

- 1. We can help the kids we mentor.** Mentoring is a two-way street. I’m learning about another person’s culture while they learn of mine. My parents modeled what is known in the Business world as “professional” behavior: being on time, communicating eye-to-eye, abstaining from insults, framing failures in positive terms, etc. We called it “be nice” in my family – you may have called it something else in yours. Many of the kids we mentor in San Bernardino have not had that same opportunity of a stable household and structured home life. Through our mentoring and play, we model a bit of that “Professional Behavior.” Because there are 18 of us, we have one-on-one time to interact and encourage positive behavior, exploring each kid’s personality and dreams.
- 2. “Our kids” can teach us.** We also learn from the students we mentor. For instance, our future patients may have grown up in a similar environment; by traveling and meeting our kids at their own school, we gain intimate experience about the lives of those from other communities. Later in our careers, we can draw upon this experience to better empathize with our patients.
- 3. It’s fun.** Remember what I mentioned about basketball and mock job interviews? It’s fun being with our kids, even if it’s a lot of work. They’re always playing jokes on us and as we get to know them, we play a few jokes on them. It feels good to take a break from studying about leukemia and lymphomas, interacting with non-medical students, and getting some exercise outside in the California sun.
- 4. It’s rewarding.** Hallmark movies would have you believe that activities like mentoring can lead to 180-degree life turn-arounds. While that is certainly a possibility, it is not the typical story. But there are extremely rewarding moments: a glimmer of vulnerability and honesty, a genuine goodbye high-five, or a teaching moment where you know you struck home. You may think they’re not listening or watching, but they are. Seeing dividends on our investments of time is really fulfilling.
- 5. It’s inspiring.** When I go back to studying, I go back with an exhausted vigor. Medical school is such a selfish pursuit – it’s all about *my* time, *my* knowledge, *and my* skills. In the medical practice (and in Christian life in general), the best physicians are selfless. Volunteering to hang out with kids is a way of getting back in touch with the same generosity that drove us to apply to medical school in the first place, and drove us to make the decision to come to a service-oriented place like Loma Linda. My mentoring is a weekly reminder of why I chose medicine: to help people who are having trouble. These kids make me realize that sometimes I’m the one who’s having trouble, but that a friendly basketball game just might do the trick to bring me back.