

Many times when my two boys ask what we are doing for dinner, I'll answer them by saying, "We are dining at Chez Mommy: Where the Food is Served with Love". They don't think I'm nearly as clever as I do. I may not be known for my culinary prowess, but my meals are always served with the best intentions. However, after my recent session as a member of the Leadership Centre County class of 2017, I discovered a place where the food really is served with love and it is delicious – The Bread Basket soup kitchen at St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Open to the community every Wednesday for lunch, this church basement setting is as warm and welcoming as it gets. A scripture verse is displayed at the center of each table, loaves of bread are made available for diners to take with them, and a smile greets every person who enters. Shirley, the volunteer in charge who welcomed us, explained that local establishments such as The Tavern, The Deli, Panera, and Wegmans all provide donations to help keep things running. In addition, they rely heavily on volunteers to make and serve soup to patrons. Each meal includes a bowl of homemade soup, a slice of fresh bread, a delicious dessert, and a whole lot of love. The experience at The Bread Basket was one of many that left a lasting impression on me as part of our Health and Human Services Day for Leadership Centre County.

There is a well-known proverb that states, "Tell me and I'll forget, show me and I'll remember, involve me and I'll understand." Such words define my experience on Health and Human Services Day. Before our lunch at The Bread Basket, our day began with an active simulation called *Step Into Poverty* led by Natalie Corman from Centre County Government. Without going into too much detail, this exercise visually symbolized the gap between those who experience great financial stability, those living in poverty, and populations that fall somewhere in between. This divide is often determined by factors such as family dynamics, access to transportation, safety in the community, health and wellness, access to medical care and insurance coverage, availability of technology, etc. At the conclusion of this exercise, the space between the groups was astounding..."show me and I'll remember." This was a powerful visual to set the tone for the rest of the day.

Then came the nuts and bolts of our session. The 49 Leadership Centre County class members were divided into 8 small groups. Each group was assigned a "family" for whom they instantly became advocates. It was up to each group to visit three service agencies in Centre County to see how they could provide for and assist these families in need. Some were facing homelessness after a devastating flood, others had children battling depression and on the verge of suicide. The circumstances were vast and varied, but what was most important was that they were realistic, and reflected situations that hundreds of people in our region face every day. It was time to discover the many organizations that help bridge the gap we saw that morning..."involve me and I'll understand".

I had the honor of meeting the staff at Interfaith Human Services as part of the advocacy plan for the family to whom my group was assigned. While not a faith-based organization itself, Interfaith Human Services receives tremendous support from area congregations. Because of that support, they can meet the needs of many families who are struggling financially and help get them back on the right path through initiatives like their Financial Care Program, Centre County Fuel Bank, and Free Furniture Program, to name a few.

By day's end, each of the eight groups reported back to the whole and shared information about the service organizations they visited. It was impactful listening to each group share their experiences and educate us on how these organizations are making a difference. I left that day equipped with information about twenty-four agencies working to assist those in need.

I will be honest, Leadership Centre County's Health and Human Services Day was emotional. While I was never so naïve to think poverty does not exist in Centre County, it was sobering to face this fact head-on and catch a glimpse of that reality throughout the day. I am grateful for the network of organizations that exist to empower our community and change the landscape of poverty in Centre County. Now I am ready to step up.