

Putting Columbia Students “At Your Service” for the Elderly & Infirm

Ashley Shaw

My name is Ashley Shaw, and I am currently a senior studying Biology and Art History at Columbia College. I joined the CSSR as a sophomore in Summer 2011 as a CSSR intern studying palliative and end-of-life care at ArchCare at Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center (TCC), a large skilled nursing facility on E. 106th St. and Fifth Avenue operated by the Archdiocese of New York which cares for a largely underserved elderly and infirm population. I was so captivated by the people I met there and so engrossed in learning about palliative care that I stayed on through the 2011-2012 academic year. In May 2012, I received two generous grants from the Columbia University Center for Career Education under the Columbia College Alumni & Parent Fund and Work Exemption Program to lay the foundations for a new volunteer program at TCC that would place Columbia University students directly at the service of TCC’s frailest long-term residents.

During the summer, I worked directly with administrators and staff at TCC to create a strong volunteer program that would directly address the current needs of TCC’s staff, patients, and long-term residents. I received invaluable support and advice throughout the project from Dr. Anthony Lechich, Medical Director, Jeannine Abruzzo, Senior Director of Quality of Life, and Thomas McDonald, Director of Volunteer Services & Therapeutic Recreation as well as from the 2012-2013 CSSR-TCC interns, Eileen Young and Rachel Schenkel. In addition, I also worked closely with the Presidents of TCC’s Resident Council and Family & Friends Council to determine the most impacting use of volunteers. On August 8th, 2012, I was granted approval from TCC’s Executive Director to begin the recruitment process for the new volunteer program. There are currently twenty-three enthusiastic, passionate students from Columbia University who are completing TCC’s Volunteer Orientation process and who will begin serving the patients and staff at TCC on Saturday, October 13th.



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As part of this new volunteer program, titled “At Your Service,” Columbia University students will work in a complex clinical setting alongside TCC’s interdisciplinary care team consisting of physicians, nurses, social workers, therapists, and chaplains to directly impact and improve the experiences of our patients, long-term residents, and their family members. Students will have the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with members of our diverse patient and resident population and shadow TCC staff members in all disciplines.

“At Your Service” student volunteers commit to performing four hours of service each week. During their first two-hour weekly shift, volunteers will assist the staff, patients, and family members of TCC’s Subacute Transitional Care program, which serves elderly and frail patients gently recovering from hospitalizations for major surgeries addressing cardiac attacks, strokes, joint replacements, pulmonary disease, and chemotherapy, among other conditions. Volunteers will assist the TCC staff in responding to call bells, greeting family, friends, and other visitors to the floor, and maintaining high morale among patients through both individualized interactions and Therapeutic Recreation activities such as Bingo, Arts & Crafts, and Volleyball. During their second two-hour weekly shift, volunteers will serve as long-term companions for an individual long-term resident who, based on observations from TCC staff, could benefit from heightened attention because he or she rarely receives visitors. Volunteers will plan activities to do with their matched resident during their weekly two-hour based on their mutual shared interests, whether that means reading a book together, playing a game of chess, or enjoying a trip to TCC’s beauty salon together. Most importantly, the “At Your Service” student volunteers serve as advocates—the attentive eyes and the ears—for the psychosocial well-being of TCC’s patients and residents.

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The “At Your Service” program also incorporates an element of service learning inherent in the CSSR-TCC internship program. Students are asked to submit a 300-word reflection piece on their experiences at TCC every month. They are asked to struggle with the following questions: How does it feel to accompany a severely ill patient on their journey towards the end-of-life? How can institutions such as TCC better address the palliative care needs of those for whom they shelter? What are the challenges facing nursing homes in today’s chaotic healthcare environment? How do we identify and address a patient’s spiritual, psychosocial, and/or existential pain? What are the institutional and social barriers that prevent the effective use of advance directives and palliative care? How do we sufficiently attend to a dying person’s spiritual and religious identity at the same time as we tend to the ailments and ills of their body? Most importantly, how do we as a society achieve a peaceful, dignified death for each human being in the healthcare institutions in which a majority of us will die? What does it mean to truly care for a person at the end of life?

These are the fundamental questions that I have grappled with as a student of the CSSR during my time at TCC and that I wish to bring to the larger Columbia University through the “At Your Service” program. We at TCC and the CSSR hope and expect that the pilot endeavor of the “At Your Service” volunteer program will blossom into a long-term collaboration between Columbia University and TCC. The “At Your Service” program will also be the first service program open to Columbia University undergraduate students that directly serves the elderly. I have been happily overwhelmed by the response to the program, not only from Columbia University students of all ages and interests eager to serve as volunteers but also from ArchCare and Columbia University affiliates who foresee possibilities for the program to be both a model of service learning and also an effective strategy to combat the harsh effects of falling Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements upon patient care in those nursing homes across the country that care for our society’s most vulnerable elderly patients.



In the end, all of this started with the conviction—bestowed upon me by the nurses, doctors, chaplains, social workers, family members, patients, and long-term residents who shared their lives with me at TCC—that as an aspiring physician I have the duty to care deeply and passionately for alleviating human suffering, with all of the spiritual, religious, and social components that are so deeply intertwined with a patient’s medical condition. For the realization of this guiding conviction, I am deeply, humbly indebted to my teachers and mentors at the Center for the Study of Science and Religion.

If you are interested in learning more about the progress of the “At Your Service” program, please contact me at ays2111@columbia.edu.