

The MSCPA asked Scott about his most meaningful volunteer experience. His answer will inspire you . . .



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I started a teambuilding program for fourth and fifth grade children. The program called 2+2=5 involved using teambuilding activities to teach skills such as leadership, communication, problem solving, and trust.

Jenny was a fourth grade student who I met in the first year of running the 2+2=5 program. I have never before and never again come across such a unique individual. The first time I met her, I thought that I must have done something wrong. She completely avoided eye contact with me, never even said hi or responded to my questions, and rarely ever participated in the 2+2=5 activities.

She would usually pull herself away from the activity within minutes. Other times, she simply would not even start the activity at all. I would usually see her sitting in the corner of the gym, undoubtedly counting down the minutes until physical education class was over. I became a little concerned because all of the other children seemed to be really enjoying the 2+2=5 program. I would constantly try to visit her and get her involved in the 2+2=5 activities; but she never spoke a word to me or any of the other college facilitators.

Until one day, Jenny's principal called me into her office for a meeting to discuss Jenny's behavior and her lack of participation in the program. The principal told me, Jenny, whose name has been changed to protect the confidentiality of the child, was a selective mute.

I had never heard of such a thing and asked for any more information that she could provide. Her principal explained that she was a selective mute and would not speak to adults at all, except for her parents. She wouldn't speak to her teachers, not one word. If a teacher called on her in class, she would tell the answer to the person sitting next to her and that person would relay the answer. If she had to make a presentation to the class, she would record it at home and give the tape to the teacher. She wouldn't speak to her teachers and she certainly didn't speak to any of the college 2+2=5 facilitators. To my knowledge, she had never spoken a word to an adult other than her parents.

During the first six weeks of running the 2+2=5 program, there was not one positive development with Jenny. Until one perfect day, I was facilitating the Human Knot activity during the leadership lesson. The team of ten and eleven year-old children was all in a tangled mass as each child was screaming over all of the others, trying to shout out instructions to the rest of the team; no one was listening to anyone else. As expected, Jenny was on the sidelines, watching, once again unwilling to speak or interact.

As the children continue to struggle through the Human Knot, I saw Jenny out of the corner of my eye, marching over to the Human Knot. Jenny tapped me on the wrist and screamed out to me, "This is never going to work!"

I asked her why. She replied, "No one's listening!!! Everyone's screaming and no one's listening."

And now I was the speechless one.

I was shocked that she finally spoke to us, but not nearly as shocked as her teacher. The team decided to choose one person who was allowed to talk and the rest of the team could not speak, only listen. In a truly awesome moment, the team chose Jenny to lead them and to be the only speaker. Jenny directed the team to untangle the human knot and the team was ultimately successful climaxing with loud cheers and applause.

The smile on Jenny's face was worth more than anything. In the remaining four weeks of the program, Jenny continued to participate in each of the activities by taking on a bigger role in the team activities and being involved in more and more discussion with the college facilitators. It was truly remarkable. I have had the opportunity to be around many inspirational and moving leaders in my career but that day, Jenny taught me how to be an inspirational leader and how to command the attention and respect of the team. She was the unexpected leader and she rose to an incredible height that day. Leaders draw internal strength during difficult tasks and rise to the level necessary to be successful.

Several months later, I revisited the elementary school where I met with the principal once again. Not surprisingly, she told me that Jenny had continued to make incredible strides. She was now talking to her teachers in class regularly and had gained immeasurable confidence in herself. She was getting better grades in all of her classes because of the exuberating level of confidence in herself, and she was interacting more with her peers. She was happy and to be quite honest, an entirely different person.

As the 2+2=5 program works with fourth and fifth graders, Jenny participated in the program again as a fifth grader. The second year was night and day to the first year. Jenny was actively participated in all of the activities and assuming leadership roles on her team without reserve. – Scott Morency

