For the past two and a half months, I have been working every week with Storybook Farm to complete my practicum. They are a nonprofit organization based in Opelika, Alabama whose mission is to provide “hope on horseback to children with uncertain futures” as well as their families. I found that working with an organization who was doing something unlike anything I had seen done previously was one reason I was drawn to it. I also found myself wanted to expand my horizons and try things I knew I wouldn’t necessarily be comfortable doing. I remember being nervous my first day, but nevertheless, I was excited to try something new and make a difference while doing it.

Storybook Farm caters tasks to each intern depending on their field of study. Because I am a sociology major, I did well with problem solving. One of the first assignments I completed was organizing the chaos that consumed the upstairs of the barn. It was currently in preparation for demolition and all items needed to be organized, cleaned, and packed. I was able to spend most of my day doing just that and helping make the moving process somewhat smoother. After this, I helped the organization plan for the upcoming year. Due to the demolition of the old barn and construction of the new one, it was pertinent that plans begin being formulated for the upcoming year to remain ahead of schedule. I came up with ideas for the Valentine’s Day party as well as the spring riding theme and assisted in making eight hundred Valentine’s Day cards. In addition to preparation and organization, I also assisted with almost every field trip that came to Storybook Farm. Field trips are huge for the organization during the summer and sometimes groups can be upwards of ninety kids. Nearly each week I managed a station and taught the children about the daily operations of Storybook Farm. One final responsibility that I didn’t necessarily expect I would adopt was that of horse care. I learned how to take the horses in and out of their paddocks and how to feed, groom, and wash them. Most importantly, I learned how important it is to give tentative care to these horses. They’re a huge part of what makes Storybook Farm who they are and their health has to be made a priority.

All the responsibilities I have completed during my practicum have made me feel fulfilled and accomplished. I came in knowing what my specific strengths and talents were and I believe they were applied in a way that was best suited for the organization. Additionally, I feel as though I have grown immensely both as a person and in my strengths. I chose to work with Storybook Farm with the hope that I would grow as a person and learn things about myself that I didn’t know I was capable of accomplishing and I obtained that. I’m stronger physically than I previously believed and I have discovered that I have great packing skills. I also have a newfound love of horses. They have a way of bringing peace and Storybook Farm’s horses in particular have so much love to share. Lastly, I find myself to be much stronger when it comes to leading and interacting with others which I previously felt was a weakness of mine. I would tend to be more on the shy side until I felt comfortable enough to open up. Due to this experience and having the opportunity to interact with so many new people, I feel exceptionally hopeful about my future. I believe I now possess the ability to be more flexible in new environments which in the nonprofit world can be essential. Gaining this boost of confidence is something I desperately needed before heading into my final year at Auburn and eventually into the real world.

Having been at Storybook Farm for a while now I have seen a lot of what it takes to work in the nonprofit sector. Storybook Farm in particular only operates under the leadership of two staff members, Founder of the organization Dena Little and Operational Manager Sara Medley. I have worked closely with both of these women and they truly have a passion for their work. If there’s anything I have learned from this experience it’s that you have to have a passion for what you do. Working in the nonprofit sector is no easy task and requires a great deal of patience and determination. Not possessing these qualities can make working in a nonprofit seem like more work than it should be. That being said, I know I have a passion for both philanthropy and nonprofit studies. I find fulfillment in helping others and making a career out of that is the best of both worlds for me.

Working in the nonprofit sector requires monitoring several moving parts such as fundraising, PR and marketing, strategic plans, and many more. As I’ve learned in my courses thus far, it’s essential that a nonprofit have well managed operations, a trustworthy board of trustees, and have all governance documents available at all times. From my short time with Storybook Farm, I have observed that they do seem to have a great board and were very well organized with all their documentation, including all governance documents, at their onboarding meeting that I attended. Both Ms. Little and Ms. Medley are constantly working to find ways to better the organization whether it be new marketing strategies, applying for more grants, or building a new barn to allow for new and improved programming opportunities. In fact, one of the things I believe Storybook Farm does best is fundraising. All programming comes at no cost to participants which makes fundraising an integral part of Storybook’s operations. Every year they host a Kentucky Derby viewing party which brings in nearly half of their annual operating budget. They receive the remaining amount from sponsorships, grants, and other donations. By obtaining this money, Storybook Farm is able to continue their programming and impact children’s lives for years to come. For seventeen years now they have lived out their mission to provide hope to children who see it as something that before was unattainable. As Ms. Little would say, “Storybook’s impact is limitless”. The children are positively impacted the second they step foot on the farm grounds and the goal is to have them leave feeling just as hopeful as they did while they were there. I saw Storybook Farm live out there mission every single day regardless of who was or wasn’t around.

My work with Storybook Farm has impacted me in ways I will never forget. I leave feeling stronger than when I came, both mentally and physically. Learning about a nonprofit and experiencing it first-hand are two very different things and I’m so grateful that I’ve had the opportunity to do both. During my coursework at Auburn, I have learned that philanthropy and nonprofits go hand in hand. It can be difficult to have one without the other. I had a teacher tell me that she couldn’t teach me everything, but she could teach me “enough to make me dangerous”. I believe that to be true today. Everything I experienced operationally during my practicum I had already learned previously through my coursework. It gave me the reassurance that I would be able to be successful and “dangerous” in the nonprofit sector. As I finish up my time at Auburn University, I leave feeling hopeful for the future.

References

Storybook farm. (2019). Retrieved from https://hopeonhorseback.org/about/