

## ***Jeremy Peterson's College Essay on Volunteering at the Boys & Girls Club in Trenton***

***BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!***

It is early Saturday morning, but like most Saturday's I need to be somewhere. I drag myself out of bed, rubbing sleep from my eyes. Soon, I am in the car and still half asleep watching Princeton's stately homes, parks and Ivy covered buildings pass by. As we head onto Route 1, the landscape transforms; now there are diners and gas station, but these are soon replaced by concrete factories and junkyards. When I see the menacing forty foot concrete prison walls topped with concertina wire, I know that I have almost reached my destination. A mere 15 miles from my home, I could almost be on a different planet; Trenton was once a proud city but is now a place filled with boarded up homes, rubble strewn blocks, and the State's maximum security prison. I pass by the looming prison walls and four blocks later I arrive at a low slung brick building housing The Trenton Boys and Girls Club

Trenton is a troubled city: 25% of the population lives in poverty, 50% of the City's students graduate from high school and the rate of violent crime makes Trenton one of the most dangerous cities in the country. However, there are parents in Trenton looking to create a better life for their children and many of them turn to The Boys and Girls Club (The Club). It may seem strange, but this brick building located 4 blocks from a state prison is the place where I feel truly content.

As I enter the building, a wave of sound chases away my latent drowsiness; hordes of children are laughing and screaming contributing to the electric atmosphere at The Club. Lights and sounds burst out of the dozens of arcade machines lining the walls, and many of the kids occupy themselves playing Dance Dance Revolution and Whack-a-Mole. Some children are playing basketball and others are in the computer lab. However, a few have been waiting for me to arrive. I check in, unlock the room, and search for the crumpled cloth boards and black and white pieces that never seem to be in the same place. In a few minutes, I have arranged the tables and chairs, and it is time for chess.

One of my regulars walks in and yells "Jeremy! Play with me!" Then other students begin to wander in looking for a game and later even some of those in the arcade get curious and poke their heads in the room.

This is my third year volunteering at The Club and I quickly settle into my routine. I pour bags of plastic pieces onto each table and try to flatten the curled cloth chess boards. I then ask, "Who is going to help me set up?"

My students and I get to work setting up each board.

"I want to play with Jeremy!" several of the children yell.

"You'll all get a turn", I call out, as I perform my chess triage trying to remember which student can play somewhat unsupervised and which ones are still learning how to move the pieces.

"Why don't you two play each other?" I suggest.

I sit down next a new player and begin my lesson, "This is the knight, it can hop over the other pieces and it always moves in an 'L' shape". She is puzzled at first, but after a half-hour of repeated corrections, she is finally ready to practice playing with another child. I get up and watch my other students play, correcting them as they go. For a brief moment, my thoughts wander to my upcoming exams, and a brief sense of panic wells up inside me.

*"I probably should be studying right now", I think.*

Then across the room, I hear one of the two students playing a full game yell, "Checkmate!"

My attention refocuses on the room, and I see the smile on the young chess champion's face. I help to set up another game, and move on to my next pair of students. Lost in the black and white squares, time passes quickly. The clock strikes twelve, and the two hour chess program comes to an end for another week.

Just as I am leaving the Club, my phone rings.

"Are you coming on the Bike Club trip?" my friend asks.

"I'll be there in 20, I'm on my way back from Trenton." I respond.

"Trenton? What are you doing in Trenton..." he asks, sounding concerned.

"Volunteering. It's kind of hard to explain...", I reply.

"I thought you would have been studying for your exams! Oh well, I'll see you in twenty." my friend says and hangs up the phone.

My father and I step into the car, leaving Trenton behind us.

"How are you feeling?" asks my father.

"I feel fantastic actually." I respond "This is honestly the highlight of my week.