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# Volunteering at the I.D.E.A. Store

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## Volunteering at the I.D.E.A. Store

The I.D.E.A. Store is a store that provides supplies for members of the community to create art or simply reuse unconventional materials. The store is located in Champaign and is operated by the Champaign Urbana Schools Foundation. It is a self-proclaimed “non-profit marketplace for the exchange of reusable goods” (IDEA Store). Profits from the items that are sold are cycled back into the community through this foundation, which provides support for the public schools and works to provide a better education for students currently attending these schools. The I.D.E.A. Store is set up as a place to donate unwanted items, such as bottle caps, playing cards, beads, buttons and paper, and so much more. A list is provided for those wishing to donate items to the store, and once they are dropped off they are sorted by the countless volunteers who work regular shifts at the store. Once items have been sorted, weighed and priced, they are set out for customers to buy. The items purchased are then used for a variety of purposes, as I discovered during my time there. This store helps to save items from ending up in landfills and encourages customers to reuse and donate their materials, raising awareness about how to be environmentally conscious while promoting creative repurposing.

According to some research about recycling in the United States, “less than 35% of households and less than 10% of businesses in the U.S. recycle.” Though I discovered from the I.D.E.A. Store that reusing materials is always a better option than simply recycling them, this statistic shows how important raising awareness about the environment is to our world. The I.D.E.A. Store works to educate its customers through workshops about creatively reusing materials and provides information to customers about how to use the various items sold in their store. By providing a place for materials to be reused and educating customers, the I.D.E.A. Store works to promote awareness about the environment we live in and providing opportunities

for local citizens to become involved in the community. The store provides opportunities for donation of money, materials and time. After I learned more about what the I.D.E.A. Store is able to do for our community, I decided it would be an excellent way for me to get involved in helping both the community and the environment.

My time volunteering was spent differently every time I entered the store. I visited the I.D.E.A. Store twice a week for five weeks and every visit I was assigned a different task. My time was spent with volunteers of all ages and experiences, each one offering insight into what volunteering at the store had provided them. Everyone I encountered was happy to show me around and answer any questions I had, and happy to have an extra set of hands to count playing cards, price stamps or clean the store. My first time volunteering was spent just getting comfortable with my surroundings and the merchandise. I was surprised by the large amount of materials in the store and all of the ways they were able to be reused. The store provides examples of how these everyday materials can be reused, such as a light made out of a dryer vent or jewelry out of buttons. The staff and volunteers are always happy to give suggestions to customers and help them work through their ideas for a craft or school project.

During a shift of volunteering, I would greet customers and see them wander through the shop. The store is full of a colorful collection of materials; baskets full of plastic bottle caps, hundreds of buttons, toy soldiers, recycled paper, fabric, etc. But what you see as you enter does not even begin to cover all that this store has to offer. Behind the counter, there is a classroom, in which classes about reusing materials and making art are taught and birthday parties are held. And even further behind the scenes, you can find volunteers separating donations, making examples, and pricing materials. The amount of donations found at the front of the store may seem overwhelming, but there is much, much more to be found in the back. The store relies

heavily on volunteers to sort through the massive amount of donations given to the store, so when I was deciding on where to volunteer I knew my help would be appreciated. From what I saw during my time, the I.D.E.A. store has many volunteers, ranging in age from high school students to retired women. And the amount of time dedicated to volunteering ranges as well; some I saw once a week and some came once or twice a month. Regardless of age or volunteering experience, everyone I spoke with was so happy to be helping this cause and their community through working at the I.D.E.A. Store.

Overall, the work I did at the I.D.E.A. Store was up at the front counter, ringing up customers. The totals for their purchases were never very large, and I was able to learn more about what each person was planning to do with their materials. I was surprised at first when people would bring things up to the counter and have no idea what they were purchasing. It made me laugh to think of buying something without first knowing what it was, but the more I saw people doing this, the more I realized that this was one of the purposes of the store. The materials are not set out in a way that makes you think about what they once were, but what they *could* be. The more I interacted with customers, the more I realized that people came to the I.D.E.A. Store specifically for this purpose. Maybe they had an art project or an idea in mind, but the materials they were choosing from did not serve a specific purpose outside of this new project. I thought that was an important perspective for everyone working there to realize, and it helps both the customers and the staff to think creatively.

Ringling up customers provided the opportunity to talk to people about how often they visit the store, or what they were planning to do with the things they were purchasing. I noticed a few trends from this work, such as the amount of teachers that came to the store to save money for their students' art projects. The staff offered suggestions and even helped people to visualize

their ideas and find appropriate materials to carry them out, always fostering artistic abilities and promoting the idea of reusing materials. Kids and adults came into the store to find craft ideas and discounted items for school projects. From what I saw, everyone was able to visualize their idea just from the objects shown in the store and the examples made by the staff helped people to get inspiration for their own projects. Customers also came to the store for crafting ideas for weddings or other special occasions, making me aware that these materials could be used in such a wide variety of ways, it really just depended on the customer's vision.

My time spent at the I.D.E.A. Store happened to coincide with an archaeology class I was taking at Parkland this semester. Though these topics may seem difficult to connect, I was surprised to find applications of themes I was learning about at Parkland throughout the store. The idea of looking at refuse as a means of getting to know a culture was the most prominent theme. We learned in archaeology that there are archaeologists who study what people throw away, and what this refuse is able to tell you about a culture in both ancient and modern times. Though most of the merchandise sold at the I.D.E.A. Store had already been sorted, cleaned and priced by the time I ever saw it, I did have the opportunity to see some of the donations as they were coming in. What people throw away or in this case, give away, does reveal quite a bit about our society, especially because many of these things are set out on a shelf and purchased fairly quickly after they are recycled. I was surprised to see that many of these items were in great condition and realized that if they had not been donated to the I.D.E.A. Store, they may have just been thrown away. I do not believe I volunteered at the I.D.E.A. Store long enough to get a holistic picture of what these donations say about those living in Champaign-Urbana, but I did begin to see how what we throw away is often easily put to use again. Donating these items to

the I.D.E.A. Store not only saves them from ending up in a landfill, but also gives them a second life to be repurposed and used creatively.

Over the course of this semester, I spent about two and a half hours a week at the I.D.E.A. Store, and I will continue to keep these shifts at least until the end of May. Every shift I worked was spent doing something slightly different, which made every day there interesting and exciting. Just during my short time spent volunteering, I learned how to work the register, the importance of reusing materials and how big of a role the I.D.E.A. Store plays in the community, both for creative reuse and for the Champaign Urbana Schools Foundation. I am so grateful for the opportunity to help the community in this way and hope that I will be able to continue to volunteer throughout the summer and possibly next semester, as well.

The greatest thing I took away from my experiences at the I.D.E.A. Store is the concept of reusing materials. We have been told countless times to reduce, reuse and recycle, but most people tend to think they are doing their part to help the environment simply by recycling. From my time spent volunteering, I learned that reducing and reusing are two of the best things we can do to help the Earth. By reusing these materials, patrons were not only saving money, but helping to keep these items out of landfills and often turn them into something beautiful. Customers came for scrapbooking, school projects, jewelry making and even just for decorating new apartments. Though these reasons may seem small and insignificant, by reusing materials, they were all doing their part to creatively help the Earth. From working at the I.D.E.A. Store, I became more conscious of the things I thought about throwing away and how I could possibly reuse them or donate them to the store for someone else to use. I also was able to speak to people who were doing their part to support the community and help the planet simultaneously, which opened my eyes to all of the caring people in Champaign-Urbana.

## Works Cited

*The-Idea-Store*. Champaign Urbana Schools Foundation. Web. 18 April 2014.

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