



Personal Essay on Volunteering at the Shelter

The first time I sorted through a box of donated clothes, I didn't think much of it. A few sweaters, some worn shoes, a stack of jeans. I folded them quickly, trying to stay busy so no one would notice I was new. An hour later, the shelter was buzzing, parents filling out forms, kids weaving between tables, volunteers calling out sizes. That's when a boy, maybe ten years old, picked up a jacket from the pile I had just folded.

I expected him to slip it on right away. Instead, he checked the buttons, tugged at the seams, and then handed it to his younger sister. "This one's good," he said. She held it against her shoulders and smiled. The whole exchange lasted seconds, but it stopped me. A jacket wasn't just a jacket to him; it was a decision about warmth, about whether his sister would be comfortable through the winter.

I kept coming back every Saturday after that. At first, I thought my job was just to fold clothes and keep the tables neat. But once I slowed down, I started noticing the details. A mom asking if a shirt was machine washable because she had no time for handwashing. A teenager choosing sneakers two sizes too big so he could grow into them. An older man leaving empty-handed because he didn't want to take from anyone else. Those little moments said more about people's lives than any label on the clothing ever could.

That's when volunteering shifted for me. I had always thought of it as giving back, something that showed commitment or looked good on paper. But the shelter taught me that service isn't about giving what you think people need. It's about listening, paying attention, and respecting



the choices they make for themselves. Sometimes what mattered most wasn't the donation itself, but the space to decide, the small sense of control.

The lesson followed me outside the shelter. In group projects, I found myself asking questions before offering ideas. At home, I learned to listen to my younger brother instead of jumping in with quick fixes. What the shelter gave me was practice in patience, in letting others speak first.

As I picture college, I know there will be new opportunities, classes, research, and internships, but I also know the details will matter just as much as the big moments. The way you treat the people around you shapes the experience more than anything else. The shelter made that clear. Service isn't measured by hours or titles. It's measured in quiet exchanges, like a jacket passed to a sister, a question asked without rushing the answer. Those are the lessons I want to carry with me.