

MassPIRG: Through the Eyes of an Advocate



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“You never truly know someone until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes.” I must have heard that saying a hundred times in my life before now, but I don’t think I actually understood that statement quite as much as I do now.

It started earlier this week after I’d published my most **recent article** about MassPIRG, the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group, as I couldn’t help but feel an itch at the back of my mind like I’d forgotten something important, and surely enough I had. Upon reviewing the article I realized that while I had talked about the organization, its past and current projects, there was one crucial point that I was missing. The advocate’s point of view, and so this week I endeavored to “write” this wrong by writing about what MassPIRG is like through the eyes of the students who serve it here on campus. After all according to campus organizer Tess Geyer from my previous interview with her, that is one of the major missions of MassPIRG, to get students involved in

advocacy.



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Last week MassPIRG was tabling and stopping all passersby at Umass Dartmouth in an effort to register more people to vote, and so naturally I went not only to talk to them and gain a bit of their perspective, but to walk a mile in their shoes and see for myself what it was like. Most of the MassPIRG volunteers I talked to seemed genuinely excited about the prospect of registering people to vote, citing reasons such as liking to help and wanting to get involved and make a difference. According to them the experience could be chaotic sometimes, and of course they would come across people who didn't want to talk to them, but as one student put it, "You just gotta accept rejection and move on you know?"

Whether they were doing it for credit or just for the heck of

it, many of the MassPIRG volunteers I talked to seemed happy about their choice and all of them said that they'd do it again in a heartbeat. For these students it's a way to advocate for something bigger than themselves. It's something that they truly believe is important, it's a way to get involved and make friends at the same time, and it's a way to build confidence and other important social skills.

My experience with MassPIRG didn't end with just talking to the volunteers however, for at 4 o'clock PM I reported for duty myself as a volunteer. Instantly I was handed a clipboard and instructed on what needed to be filled out and what the best ways for approaching people were. I was then sent off like a little worker drone to collect as many voter registrations as I could. To make a long story short, it was a lot tougher than I'd imagined.

It's easy not to think about ignoring these sorts of people when you're the one doing the ignoring, but suddenly when you're on the other side it feels completely different. With each passerby who says a polite, "No, thanks" or "I'm already registered" or just ignores you entirely, your heart sinks a little lower or at least mine did. Perhaps it was that I wanted so badly to do a good job, or maybe it was because I had expectations that it would be easier from witnessing the chaotic bustle of earlier in the day, but either way with every person that passed me by I felt a little more disappointed and eventually numb to the rejection.

Then, after God only knows how long, somebody finally stopped and agreed to register with me. I felt such elation as he completed the form. This is what it was all about, this was what all the minutes of rejection had been leading to, and he ended up filling the form out incorrectly. My heart sank again, I was supposed to be the one to help him fill out the form but I couldn't even do that correctly. Luckily the young man agreed to fill out the form again, and once that was completed I went back to being rejected by the passersby.



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That moment had changed me though, because afterwards I no longer believed it was impossible to get someone to stop and even though I didn't end up getting another voter registered I never lost hope that it would happen. And knowing what I do now about the experience, it amazes me how many completed forms they were able to get, over 300 and that was just the first day. If the entire organization is as dedicated as the people I met, I have no doubt they'll easily surpass 11,000 statewide.

This was an enlightening experience to say the least, and I clearly had far more fun than I realized because in no time at all my time with the advocates was up. All in all I would be glad to do it again, and I'll never look at these volunteers the same way again. As I've said in my previous article if you're interested in getting more involved there are paid

positions, internships, and of course they always accept volunteers. You can check out the general website here: <http://www.masspirg.org/> or if you happen to be a student here: <http://masspirgstudents.org/>
