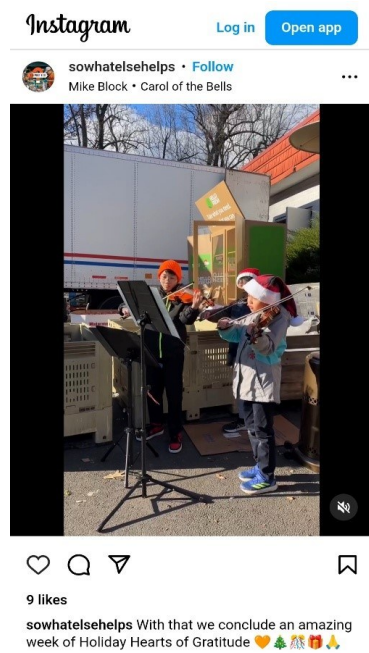


it was a heartwarming experience to see people enjoying the music: it added a festive touch to the usual routine!



4. The Challenges: Early Mornings, Weather, and Waiting

Like any volunteer work, there are some challenges. Waking up early is tough, especially when I sleep late on a Friday night, and considering that the week is full of school days, it would make sense for you to at least take a day-long break from school.

Another challenge comes when some people seem annoyed when we hand out food. I presume they might be frustrated with unfair treatment (for example: accidental miscount while handing out food), but luckily, these instances are rare though.

The late months also makes some aspects of volunteering tough, especially when it comes to playing music outdoors. The violin has one specific rival: the cold. Cold weather can seriously affect the instrument—strings go out of tune, and it becomes harder to play.

Lastly, there are moments during the waiting time when it can get a little boring or feel like nothing is happening. This instance is super common, so it's reasonable to bring at least something to fidget or play with before stepping out of the house.



5. Summary: Why So What Else is Worth It

Despite the challenges, So What Else has been a rewarding experience. The organization is filled with caring staff and people, and it provides a real, tangible way to give back. It's a great place for earning SSL hours if you need them, and it's also a place where you can make a difference in your community, even if it's just by handing out food or playing a few holiday tunes.

When leaving, the best part is the feeling of fulfillment. There's an unforgettable sense of joy that comes from knowing you've helped someone, even if it's just for a moment. I might complain about the early mornings or the cold weather, but I always leave feeling good about the work I've done. So, if you're looking for a way to get involved, or

if you need SSL hours, So What Else is definitely a great place to start. It's not always easy, but it's always worth it. For more information on how you can help, check out their website at sowhatelse.org.



So much to learn at So What Else
Written by: George Wang
Photography: Parents of CYOC members

As a member of the Capital Youth Outreach Club (CYOC), I am grateful for the opportunity to volunteer at So What Else.

Back in June 2024, I was proud of myself for just being a sixth grader and already completed more than 75 SSL hours. I had planned to stop my volunteer activities since I had met the requirements. My last volunteering event was serving as a greeter at the Montgomery Serves Awards 2024 Ceremony where I welcomed attendees and directed them to their seats. This ceremony was to honor individuals/organizations who had dedicated significant time to serving the community. Some of the award's honorees and nominees devoted decades of their personal time to helping people in our community. Even some of my peers as middle schoolers had put hundreds of hours to make our community better. These made me realize that the required hours are just like a course we learned in school. It is an introduction and a guide on how one individual can benefit their community by volunteering. Like other courses that we learned from school, nothing will end in the classroom but will extend to our real life and live along with us wherever we go. I told myself why not be more like them. I wanted to make a lasting difference in my community.

There are so many ways to serve our community. I had been working on cleaning community parks, veteran cemetery and helping with public events. Although these activities made me proud of myself, most of them are seasonal and happen once a year. How to graft my passion gained from Montgomery Serves Awards 2024 Ceremony to reality was a little challenging for me. Luckily, at the same event, I met Mr. Dave Silbert. Mr. Silbert is

the executive director and one of the co-founders of So What Else. Under his leadership, So What Else is working hard from every angle to improve the lives of children and families living in underserved communities in the Baltimore-Washington Metro Area. Understanding the impact of So What Else on our community made me believe this is the place to go for my future volunteering activities.

I clearly remember the first time I went to help; my mom and I chose the first shift which started at 5 am. We got there around 4:30 am, I didn't expect lots of people to be there so early in the morning. When we arrived, I was amazed by the crowd of busy people who had already started working under lights. I learned that some of them had already started their shift one hour earlier. Beyond the busy So What Else staff and volunteers, a line of people within their cars had formed all the way to Nicholson Ln which was about a mile away I thought! I instantly felt the urgency to be part of the team and help, because I understood how much they needed the food by coming 3-4 hours early before the food distribution really started. After a brief training by experienced volunteers, I quickly learned how to work in the warehouse, where I worked with a team of volunteers to pack boxes with fresh produce such as cucumbers, grapes, mushrooms, and cauliflower. We also packed non-perishables like canned beans, canned tomatoes, and canned tuna. It sounds like a very easy task for me at the beginning, but I realized that there were a lot of challenges in the warehouse. One of them was that the boxes which came with donations had all kinds of sizes and qualities. We had to carefully stack every single box to make sure they didn't topple during transport from the warehouse to distribution stations. At the warehouse, I learned how to work in and manage a production line. At around 8 AM that morning I got my first experience of the drive-up station, where people drive their cars to pick up food. The drive-up station allows 4 cars in at a time. The volunteers could load the cars with food which had been packed up within the warehouse. When all the cars were finished with loading, all 4 cars would be allowed to leave at once. This work was especially backbreaking because of the weight of the food that needed to be loaded and how fast the team had to cycle to make sure every car got everything. On top of everything, keeping the safety of clients, volunteers and staff is always the biggest consideration and there are many procedures that site managers Chris, Megon, Leo, Isabel, and Cynthia had to put first. Many volunteers had worked tirelessly from dawn to no waiting line of clients, which encouraged me to work as long as my schedule

allowed, which is about 6 hours every week on average.

I still remember there was a rainy day. I was working in the drive-up station initially as traffic control to make sure no more than 4 cars entered at a time. I was cold and wet outside, but I stayed motivated because I wanted to help those people who need the food to feed their family. Later at around 10 AM, I rotated to help load cars. Although it was a laborious position, I stayed committed. I just wanted to help more. Even though it was a miserable day, I stayed to the very end of the food distribution.

Most of the time the volunteering was more pleasant, and I often worked in the walk-up station. This was a place where we distributed food to individuals who came on foot or by bus. Our team is in charge of packing seasonal veggies, unloading trucks, distributing food based on the inventory, organizing and managing the distribution line as well as maintaining a clean and safe environment.

There are also challenges at the walk-up station, but with each shift, we continue to learn how to address issues and solve problems as they arise. Every time I volunteer at So What Else, we gain more experience, allowing us to refine the process and make it run more smoothly.

One of the challenges within the walk-up station is that not everyone speak English, meaning we must communicate in different languages to serve as many people as we could. Fortunately, I speak Chinese at home, and Spanish is one of the electives I take at school. Although I'm not as fluent in Spanish as I am in English, I made many efforts to speak it more to help those in need, and it proved to be very effective. At the same time, I noticed significant improvements in my Spanish skills. Here are some words and phrases that I found particularly helpful:

- 1. ¡Hola! ¿Cómo te llamas? (Hello! What's your name?)
2. ¿Cuántos quieres? (How many do you want?)
3. ¿Tienes una cita? (Do you have an appointment?)

Another challenge is that cars kept driving into the walk-up station. We talked with the drivers several times, but it didn't work. To prevent that, we start put traffic cones to tell the cars to go around instead of go through. This stopped the risk of any walkers getting run over by a car. That had proved especially effective because no

cars would approach the station.

Another example of our efforts to improve the process is when we started using stanchions to ensure that people only received their allotted amount of food. This simple measure helps prevent any frustration or dissatisfaction that might arise if someone took more than their fair share. It has also benefited the entire team of volunteers, as it reduces the likelihood of conflict or complaints from individuals who might become upset if they saw someone else receiving more or something different than what they were given.

The biggest challenge was the new registration process. The first few weeks after So What Else adopted the new appointment system only a few people came, even though they were informed of the change by handouts we gave and signs we put out. Turns out they didn't know how to make an appointment and had nowhere to seek help. After finding out the issue, if the person came without an appointment, I taught them how to make appointments by showing them step by step. Slowly more and more people came with proper appointments.

So What Else has also allowed me to learn many skills that I might otherwise not be able to learn, such as how to operate a pallet jack or use a truck's lift gate. Here I also learned how to be a leader and work efficiently.

My experience at So What Else has exposed me to many aspects of life, helped me realize that I can make a difference, and prepared me for any future challenges I might have to deal with. I learned a lot of life skills like how to push through when times are hard and how to vent anger in a way that doesn't harm anyone. I found the experiences also helpful in class. It helped me realize that I don't have to worry about judgment.

I would like to thank So What Else for giving me the chance to learn and grow. I would also like to thank my family, friends and peer volunteers for continuous support.

