If you were asked to give three reasons why you are pursuing a career in medicine, healthcare, research etc, one of your answers would likely be “to help people.” To back up this answer, you should be able to give examples of service experiences that demonstrate your desire to help people. Service experience with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, or a local nursing homes can all demonstrate your compassionate and empathetic side. Your service experience should be about both giving of your time, and learning from those you are aiding.

Tips to Gain Positive Experiences
1. Identify a service organization that has meaning to you, and focus your service hours on it. It may be necessary to volunteer your time at several sites before selecting a site that is the best fit for you.
2. When you have found a service activity that you enjoy, consider talking to the volunteer coordinator about taking on increased responsibilities, such as a special project, training new volunteers, financial responsibilities or activities with state, national or international affiliates.
3. Have meaningful experiences with the people with whom you interact. You can accomplish this by remaining with an agency for an extended period of time (versus frequently switching agencies.)
4. Journal meaningful events (positive and not-so-positive) so you can recall experiences later.
5. Keep track of how many hours you have volunteered, as well as the dates you begin and end the experience(s) and make sure your volunteer coordinator/supervisor also tracks the time.
6. Working with populations that have been less fortunate in life and/or who experienced greater human suffering tend to offer the greatest learning opportunities for students. Experiences such as taking trips to Appalachia to do home repairs, helping adults prepare for the GED, or being a Big Brother/Big Sister can give you great insight into the challenges many people face.
7. If you find that the agency you are volunteering for is not a great fit for you, let the volunteer coordinator/supervisor know that you will be changing agencies before you start your service with another agency. Despite the quality of your experience, thank the agency for the opportunity to work with it. Although volunteering is generally a “free” service to the agency, it often requires a great deal of work for staff members.

Pitfalls to Avoid
1. Don’t rack up as many different service activities as you can so you have an extensive list on organizations your resume.
2. Don’t assume only health-related experiences are relevant.
3. Don’t fall into a “checklist mentality.” In other words, don’t do a service experience for one summer, and then quit volunteering for the rest of your undergraduate career. It appears you only did the service to be able to say you did it. Strive for continuity.
4. Do not volunteer at an agency where you feel in any way disrespected, useless, or unsafe.

Ideas for Service Sites
• Firu Sharp (firuzan.sharp@osumc.edu) maintains a list of service organizations with which OSU medical students have worked. She’s a great resource and happy to work with BMS students.
• Lifecare Alliance: http://www.lifecarealliance.org/12951.cfm
• OSU Community Connections: http://communityconnection.osu.edu/homepage.html
• Churches, temples, and synagogues, and other religious organizations.

Final note: Once you begin volunteering, get to know the Volunteer Coordinator/Supervisor. He or she may be a great character reference for you in the future!