

Volunteers give a year to Federal Way kids

By Seth Bynum
Federal Way News

"It's all about the kids," volunteer Katie Smuckler says without hesitation.

She carries that philosophy with her to work everyday at Saghali Middle School, where the Connecticut native works to complete her second year in AmeriCorps.

Like many of her fellow volunteers in the nation-wide program, Smuckler answers an internal, driving call to serve.

After graduating from college as an English major, she packed up her car and headed west. As she traversed the Cascades and coasted into Federal Way, she met up with 53 other volunteers in the city's public school system. Like Smuckler, 92 percent of the volunteers recently graduated from college. More than half came to Federal Way from outside Washington. All of them have elected to live below the poverty line for the sake of the city's 22,395 students.

The thought of her young students keeps her smiling when she cashes a meager monthly stipend. As Katie struggles to pay her rent and utilities on \$800 a month, she still maintains that she has the best job around.

"I love the students so much," said Smuckler, who works as a tutor at Saghali during the school day. "They give me the motivation to plan amazing activities that help them grow."

After school, Smuckler, and co-leader Kenny Shuford from Buffalo, New York, coordinate activities at the Westway Community Center near Twin Lakes. As second-year volunteers, they observed as the first year team members conduct an afternoon science program for a group of 20 children.

Veronica Garcia, a volunteer from Beaumont, Texas, helped the students examine strands of their hair under a microscope.

During school, Garcia teaches ELL (English Language Learners) students at Decatur. As a Latina, she admits to taking a special interest in the Spanish-speaking students in the program.

Across the room, AmeriCorps team member Dan Blum of Connecticut, explained the relationship between smell and taste with an experiment that involved the students trying different pieces of candy while pinching their noses.

When the center closed at 5:30 last Thursday, the volunteers walked each of the kids home. Smuckler stayed back to clean up after the program and shared what she loves about volunteering.

"The job is always exciting," she said. "It just feels good to do what we do."

As an activist, Smuckler enjoys getting her hands dirty, figuring out the needs of the community and developing a plan to address them. The local AmeriCorps program offers figures indicating that 36 percent of students in Federal Way public schools live in poverty.

"The students in this area come from low-income families," Smuckler said of the children at the community center Thursday. "There's a tremendous need for what we do as volunteers during and after school."

This same need motivates director Monda Holsinger, who helped bring the first AmeriCorps volunteers to Federal Way 10 years ago. As director, she has seen the program grow from nine members to 54. Today, she works to expand what has become the largest AmeriCorps team in the state.

"Kids in our public schools deserve the very best," Holsinger said. "They need high quality volunteers, ones with extreme passion about national service. It takes an amazing heart to want to give a year to service," said Holsinger, "these volunteers go to work each day with the goal of making the world a better place."



Photos by Seth Bynum/Federal Way News

AmeriCorps volunteer Rachel Dotson and Westway Community Center volunteer Allan Bottemiller instruct students in a science experiment last Thursday. Dotson, an Oregon native, spends four days each week working in the Federal Way public school system as part of her year of service.

She recruits the most motivated applicants, the ones she feels have the heart for a year of volunteering.

"Most of them are highly educated," she added, "but intellect plays a secondary role to compassion. I can teach the new recruits a lot," Holsinger insists, "but I can't teach them to have a heart."

Last year, she interviewed more than 165 applicants from around the country for the program's 54 positions.

She offers the new recruits an unrelenting passion for volunteering, Smuckler said, while serving up a strong dose of reality about the hard work the team members will face in AmeriCorps.

Like many of the new applicants, Smuckler decided to volunteer in Federal Way over the other Washington programs after talking to the director.

"Monda has a wonderful sales

pitch for the program," Smuckler said. "She's exuberant and amazing, but most of all she was straight up about how hard it is."

Veronica Garcia had visited Seattle before taking a position with the Federal Way AmeriCorps team. Attracted to the beauty of Puget Sound, she said, Veronica had decided on Western Washington generally, but her interview with Holsinger sold her on the Federal Way program.

"Monda just made her program out to be the best," Garcia said. "And after becoming a part of it, I see that it is."

The volunteers share a common joy of working for a director who cares as much for the students of Federal Way as they do.

"I love my job," Holsinger said. "Working with these volunteers, I feel like the luckiest woman in the world."

This Friday, May 20, the AmeriCorps team will host "Sweets for Success," a dessert benefit with the hopes it will generate funds for low-income students whose families cannot afford the increasing costs of

extracurricular activities like sports, art and music.

Ravi Jaskar, a Tacoma native and AmeriCorps volunteer in Federal Way, has helped orchestrate the program. He and co-leader Leslie Crawley, of Minnesota, developed the fundraiser as part of the AmeriCorps Civic Engagement team, which works to build relationships between the volunteers and the community, and in turn, the community and the public school system.

Jaskar's team has lined up School Superintendent Tom Murphy and Federal Way High School alumnus and NFL star Lake Dawson as speakers. Guests can participate in silent and live auctions, Jaskar said, or enjoy the lineup of local performers.

He hopes the event will generate \$10,000 for students in Federal Way.

Todd Beamer High School will host the event, and tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children under 12. For more information or tickets, contact Ravi Jaskar at 253-988-2863.



Veronica Garcia, an AmeriCorps volunteer from Beaumont, Texas, focuses the microscope so that students Desarae Torgerson and Amelia Soto can view the dyed stalks of celery at a greater magnification. Garcia uses her talents as a native Spanish speaker and her BS in biology as a full-time volunteer. During school hours, she helps teach the ELL class at Decatur. Last Thursday, she volunteered at the Westway Community Center and worked to introduce the children to biology in a science program.



AmeriCorps volunteer Rachel Dotson walks home with students Keanna Beaver, right, Alica Torgerson and Edgar Maceda-Gonzalez. Torgerson and Maceda-Gonzalez carry cups of dyed celery they used in a science experiment earlier in the afternoon at the Westway Community Center in Federal Way.