

Service with a Smile

Building Relationship

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In their recent Meditation On Our Response To The Call of Christ, the US Provincials highlighted the essential point that our schools enter into a deeper solidarity with the poor and the marginalized when, among other things, “our service projects open young eyes to suffering and oppression in their own cities and neighborhoods” and “alumni return to ask how they can make a difference in our broken world.” (#37). By a serendipitous confluence of events and circumstance, the Campus Kitchen Project at Gonzaga has enabled us to expand and deepen that solidarity. The opportune event was the appointment of one of our alumni as COO of the DC Central Kitchen; the circumstance was the existing presence on our campus of the Father Horace McKenna Center, a drop-in center and overnight shelter for the poor and homeless in our neighborhood.

In the summer of 2005, Gonzaga graduate Mike Curtin left his local restaurant business to become Chief Operating Officer of the DC Central Kitchen. DC Central Kitchen is a local nonprofit that prepares some 4000 meals per day for the city’s poor and needy. In addition to preparing most of the city’s emergency and charity food, the kitchen also operates a culinary job training program for under skilled and under employed people in the city. That summer, Mike approached us with the idea of creating a high school kitchen around the basic model of DC Central Kitchen. He put us in touch with Karen Borchert and the Campus Kitchen Project. Karen came up with the idea of Campus Kitchens some six years ago while a student at Wake Forest. The idea is pretty simple. College campuses have large food service operations, leftover food, under utilized kitchen facilities, and large numbers of potential volunteers. Why not capture the unused food before it becomes waste, utilize existing kitchen facilities and student labor to prepare and

package the food for delivery to needy people in the community? The first Campus Kitchen was started in 2000 at St. Louis University, and since, the organization has opened kitchens at ten other colleges and universities. Gonzaga’s kitchen is the first one at the high school level.

Because of our urban location and the kitchen facilities of the McKenna Center on our campus, Gonzaga seemed an ideal location to try the concept on the high school level. The kitchen operates as a three-way partnership between Gonzaga, the Campus Kitchen Project, and the McKenna Center. Since we prepared our first meal in November of 2005, Gonzaga’s Campus Kitchen has delivered more than 6000 meals and helped recover some 2000 pounds of food. All this is done by student volunteers who work after school on cooking shifts two days a week and on delivery shifts another two days. The project is coordinated by Brian Larkin, a Gonzaga and Fairfield University graduate who is a member of our Alumni Service Corps. For the project, Brian has assembled a leadership team of ten students who help coordinate the kitchen activities.

Gonzaga’s unique location helps our program strongly connect with the community. On one side of the school is the Nation’s Capitol and a booming business district. On the other is one of the more impoverished areas in DC. This contradiction provides the perfect outlet for Gonzaga students to engage the poor. As leadership team member and Gonzaga senior Michael Christian says, “Being a member of the Campus Kitchen has really opened my eyes to see another side of life.”

Far from being the first or only service opportunity for Gonzaga students, the Campus Kitchen is unique because volunteers prepare the meals, walk them to every location, and serve clients door-to-door. This face-to-face interaction is often the most powerful and lasting aspect of the student’s experience. “I see the same faces every week and they remember me and will ask where I was if I couldn’t be there the previous week. I know if they have kids or not or what they’re doing for the holidays,” says Gonzaga senior Andrew Plofchan. “Seeing the same people every Tuesday makes the experience more real.”

Most of the people who receive meals are elderly and confined to their apartments. Since the student volunteers are sometimes the only person clients speak to all day,

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With Those Most in Need

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connecting with them and building strong relationships is highly encouraged. Asking simple, ice-breaker questions can lead to long informative chats

walk in at the beginning only wanting to get some service hours, and walk out at the end with a new viewpoint. Seeing that our clients are the poor, marginalized or voiceless, but nonetheless people not much different from themselves is a real awakening for students.” By seeing

I can see the students change. They walk in at the beginning wanting only to get service hours, and walk out at the end with a new viewpoint. They realize that our clients are poor, marginalized or voiceless, but nonetheless people not much different from themselves.

the same people every week the Gonzaga students involved in the kitchen have made a much stronger connection with the surrounding neighborhood. The face-to-face interaction with clients when delivering meals gives students the opportunity to create lasting relationships with people they would otherwise never meet.

In addition to the students, the Gonzaga faculty and staff also helped the Campus Kitchen cause. One of the most remarkable events was the Thanksgiving TurkeyPalooza. During TurkeyPalooza, Gonzaga’s Campus Kitchen provided Thanksgiving-themed meals to all 82 regular Campus Kitchen clients. The faculty and staff contributed over 30 turkeys for the event. After all was said and done, some 50 people in the Gonzaga community chipped in and volunteered their time and effort for TurkeyPalooza 2006.

Of course, all of our Jesuit schools have service activities of varying types. After school tutoring, summer immersion trips in various parts of our own country or the Third World, soup kitchen and nursing home visits are all

about the client’s family, music, the weather or God. One of the most memorable encounters occurred when a student bonded with a client over the music that was playing in her living room. Ever since, each time he delivers a meal to her, they talk about music.

This interaction often leads to dramatic changes in the students’ opinion of the people they serve. As Brian Larkin says, “I can see them change. They’ll

part and parcel to our schools efforts to educate young men and women for others. An enterprise like the Campus Kitchen is a great vehicle for helping students deepen their solidarity with those most in need in their own neighborhood. It can engage students, alumni, faculty, staff and parents in a common school-based activity, and could be adapted successful at a number of Jesuit schools, particularly those situated in densely populated urban areas. After all, as the Provincials also note in their Meditation, to the extent that we deepen our solidarity with those who are least among us, we deepen it with Christ.

Notes:

Thanks to Brian Larkin who contributed to this article.

You can learn more about DC Central Kitchen and the Campus Kitchen Project at:

www.dccentralkitchen.org

www.campuskitchens.org