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Reunited

Mentor Michigan AmeriCorps members are fortunate to serve in a program that allows us to see our recruited mentors positively impacting the lives of children. At times, it is easy to forget how valuable our service is to our communities. Seeing Jan and her mentee Brandon reminds me... About a year ago, I received a mentee referral from the student advocate at St. Ignace Area Schools. She had a 1st grade boy named Brandon who could really use some extra help reading. Around the same time, Jan filled out an application to be a mentor. Jan and her husband have two grown children. She works as a medical technologist at a local hospital and didn't have much free time after-school or on the weekends but was interested in mentoring a child during

the school day. After being matched, Jan and Brandon met together about once or twice every week until the end of the school year. Last fall, when school started, I received news that Brandon's family had moved away. Jan chose not to be re-matched. Right after Christmas Break this year, I received an e-mail from the student advocate. Brandon's father and grandfather both recently passed away; Brandon and his mother were moving back to St. Ignace. "Brandon could really use a mentor. Is Jan still available by chance?" Within a week, Jan began meeting with Brandon again. I asked Jan why she enjoys mentoring. "My family valued education, even if I'm the only one with a college degree. Maybe I can help Brandon concentrate on his schoolwork just



Brandon and Jan working on spelling words.

enough so that he will succeed at something, learn to enjoy reading, and make better choices." Jan also added, "I never wanted to be a teacher and the thought of being responsible for a whole classroom is scary. One kid at a time can be fun. I've taught piano [lessons] for a lot of years and learned that relating to one child at a time is rewarding." Moments like this remind us of why we serve. We are serving to make a positive difference in the lives of children!

A Heartfelt Act of Service

Faith in Youth Partnership is an organization built on lifting young kids to their full potential. Our specific *Faith in Youth* group, called "The Outlet," challenged kids to reach outside themselves and send Valentines greetings to the patients at Freedom Village (an adult independent living facility) on February 7th. It was a life changing and surprising experience for the six kids that we took along. We walked beside them as they glanced at the faces of the residents, and slowly but surely

began reaching their arms out to them in love. We talked and hugged and visited as many residents as we could while delivering our handmade Valentines. The faces of the residents beamed with joy as they saw the visitors walk in. It was a visit that was beneficial for both the residents and the youth that came. After leaving the building and a quick snack at a local restaurant, the kids talked about their excitement from the trip. The kids now understood the

importance of caring for others. As we were leaving for the day, one child glanced up at the volunteer next to her and said, "You know what? Helping people really does make you feel good." That's exactly the lessons these kids were looking for.



Youth and Promise: The City Year Detroit Heroes Programs



The Young Heroes listening to the *Pioneers for Peace* talk about the consequences of violence.

The Heroes programs, run by *City Year Detroit*, are focused on taking students from across the Metro Detroit area and engaging them in service learning projects throughout their communities with the hopes of both bettering the city and making the participants better leaders, civically aware, and engaged people. The Young Heroes program, which engages middle school students, has more than 75 students enrolled to serve at 19 different events. The City Heroes program, which works with high school aged students, involves more than 50 students who serve and learn on 10 different occasions. The program meets every Saturday and covers a different topic each week, going over such themes as Hunger and Homelessness, the Environment, or Financial Literacy. One topic in particular that really affected the Young Heroes was Youth and Violence. This day was focused on teaching about the consequences of violent activity and ways that students can avoid resorting to violence. Specifically, two officers from the Detroit Police Department presented a program that educated the Heroes about the situations that the police department encounter as a result of violence in society and specifically among youth. Following that, we traveled to visit with the *Pioneers for Peace*, a non-profit group composed completely of people who have been victimized by violence. They spoke to the Heroes about the situations in their lives that led them to where they were and why the Heroes should use means other than violence to solve their own problems. When the students reflected on that day's program, their thoughts showed how capable young people can be if they are given a chance to do something great. The thing that makes the Heroes programs so unique and important is that it challenges youth to go beyond the things that they think they are able to do, and encourages them to learn, expand, and develop themselves. Through this program, the Heroes are able to learn that they are able to be useful and can put themselves in a position to make things better.

Summer Kick Off



Summer Kick Off is one of the most rewarding experiences that I have had in AmeriCorps.

Summer Kick Off is a service project that *Cherry Street Health Services HealthCorps* puts on once a year on the Saturday after school lets out for the summer. The event is targeted to kids from infants to twelve year olds. There are numerous booths set up with different activities for the kids and the parents that bring them. Children enjoy activities such as story hour, arts and crafts, face painting, games, informational booths about different programs offered through Cherry Street Health Center, and a DUNK TANK! Prizes are raffled off throughout the day and are separated into age appropriate groups and range from key chains, coloring and activity books, hula-hoops, or new bikes with helmets. It is not uncommon to see media at this event. So far, every year there has been at least one radio station that broadcasted live at Summer Kick Off. Articles are also printed in many of the local newspapers covering the event, from local Hispanic newspapers to The Grand Rapids Press. Guest appearances from such mascots as the Bee from Old Country Buffett and Crash, the Whitecaps baseball mascot, join the festivities. The *Cherry Street Health Services HealthCorps* team raises money for this event all year round. They get volunteers from local high schools, Cherry Street Health Center, and members of the Michigan Primary Care Association's AmeriCorps team. Personally this is one of my favorite service projects. Being assigned to *Cherry Street Health Services* through Michigan Primary Care Association, I get to help with the organization and execution of Summer Kick Off. One of the best things to see is all the kids and their faces as they enjoy the games. Last year the dunk tank was a huge hit. It had a constant line as all the AmeriCorps members took turns sitting nervously in the tank waiting to be plunged into the water. It was also great to see the kids who got new bikes ride them around the Kick Off and then home, especially when you know that that child has never received a new bike before. Summer Kick Off is one of the most rewarding experiences that I have had in AmeriCorps.

If You Had No Words

Do you ever wonder what some children think about when they first meet you? I do. Now add a bit of a special need to that child's world. Let me tell you about a little boy I met. His name is Aidan. He is a sweet, round faced, bright-eyed little boy with whom I get to interact every Thursday at our regular playgroup. I have this opportunity through my service with *Superior AmeriCorps* and L'anse Baraga BHK Head Start. Aidan, Stefanie (his mom), and Reese (his sister) have been coming to playgroup since mid-October. Although he has a contagious smile, his needs are quite different from most two and a half year olds; he has not yet conquered the technique of talking. Despite this, he can clearly communicate his wants and needs with hand gestures and little grunting sounds. His big blue eyes also give you a sign he wants or needs something. He loves to have paper and some sort of writing utensil in his hand. He colors or draws like any other two and a half year old would. When the world around him is moving, he doesn't care; it's as if he blocks it out and stays in his own little realm. While he and all the children are offered various fun things to do at playgroup, Aidan prefers to draw or color. When lunchtime comes around, it is interesting to say the least. Aidan loves to eat yogurt. His mom tells me that, for a long time, this is all he would eat. So as you can imagine, we keep plenty of yogurt on hand for him since he does not enjoy many of the other food items that are offered. His mom, Stefanie, is quick to tell me each week that I can come home with them anytime. She says Aidan likes when I'm at playgroup. I have noticed that he doesn't really go to many people; however, when I am there, his eyes light up and he puts his arms out for me to pick him up. This is a wonderful feeling for me, knowing that I have made a difference to him. I have learned through this sweet little boy that, by serving through *AmeriCorps*, I can bring help to others and also bring tremendous joy to myself. I have expanded my sights to new and different areas of work that I find interesting and opened my heart to a great little guy with special needs.



AmeriCorps Saves Lives



Transition Central Students

The Michigan Groundwater Stewardship Program (MGSP) AmeriCorps is tasked with helping residents protect Michigan's groundwater. One of the ways we do this is through a Home*A*Syst (H*A*S), a risk assessment used to evaluate homes and property for pollution and health risks. We also train others to do an H*A*S. I could never, even after meeting with the thousands in my service, have predicted some of this program's effects. In my service area there is a program called Transitions Central. This is a program filled with young adults who do not yet have the skills to live life on their own. Some have problems from a "traditional disability", e.g. Asperger's syndrome (a mild autism spectrum disorder) while others have the "non-traditional disability" of a dysfunctional childhood. This last area cued my interest. Maybe I could teach the students and help "break the cycle." After all, I thought, the reason they had trouble was because their parents probably did not know either. I thought by training the students to perform an H*A*S, they could reach their relatives and educate them. Not only would the student

"transition," but the parent would as well. Maybe a younger sibling would not have this problem. I have volunteered and worked in many areas helping young adults. Because of this, and my nature, I have developed a jaded edge, an edge that did not believe that people's bad habits could be broken easily. However, I hoped that this time I could help. The instructor for Transitions Central, Ms. Cook, identified many areas that could hopefully help them transition to living independently. She wanted them to learn what some take for granted; for example, how to read a label or how to apply cleaning products safely. As a pre-test, I asked them to collect examples of poisons around their site. One gave me milk and another salad dressing; I knew much help was needed. I tried to fill this need. Fast forward to my dinner months later... I happened to eat at the same time and place as one of the students mentioned above. Ann came up to me and told me how she had stopped her mother from mixing Clorox and ammonia, a possibly lethal combination, near her baby brother. She offered a "thanks." She remembered, or at least that is what she was telling me! I may have helped break a cycle, but I was more effective than I had intended. Ann was an Asperger's student who also came from a dysfunctional home. The somewhat jaded person I had become happened to be too cynical. I see now that I was able to help both "disabilities." I do not contend that I can and will have this effect always or believe that my teaching will always dramatically save lives. This, however, illustrates how needed and helpful we can be in our service.

The Moments That Matter



Even Start students show their appreciation after a family literacy event.

With tears in her eyes, Amanda said, “Thank you.” Just four weeks earlier, we met for the first time. Yet that day in late December she hugged me as if we were life-long friends. She thanked me, took her daughter’s hand, and then left me standing there alone, quietly thanking her. Our relationship began when Amanda enrolled in Even Start, a family literacy program with four key components: adult education, parenting, parent-child interaction, and early childhood education. While many Even Start programs exist throughout the state, my program specifically serves high-need families living in Downriver Detroit. Supported by The Guidance Center and *Downriver CARES AmeriCorps*, Even Start helps parents work toward earning a G.E.D. while learning how to strengthen family bonds. While the majority of my service occurs in Even Start’s Early Childhood Education classroom, the program hosts monthly family events that bring staff and families together in a celebration of literacy and unity. Through these events, I have been able to build meaningful relationships with all stakeholders, clients and staff alike. As December quickly approached, the Even Start staff and I began planning a special family event. When Amanda entered the adult classroom before holiday break, she was shocked to find piles of new toys, books, clothing, and food all over the room. With her toddler busy in the Early Childhood Education room, Amanda excitedly selected items from the heaping piles. The toys safely hidden in her car, Amanda’s daughter later joined all of the parents, children, and staff for a holiday lunch. Later, the children each selected one book and one toy to take home and enjoy that very day. The energy in the room was overwhelming as laughter and cheer filled the normally quiet study space. As Amanda and her daughter prepared to leave, Amanda paused and approached a few staff members, including myself. “Thank you so much,” she said. “You have done so much for me. I didn’t think that I’d be able to give my daughter a Christmas this year, but now she’ll have some presents under the tree and a warm meal. Thank you so much.” And with those few heart-felt words and a hug, Amanda reached for her daughter’s hand and walked out the door, leaving an impression that will stay with me for years to come.

Kids Excited about Service



For most kids growing up today, life is filled with school, sports, or hanging out with friends. However, more and more kids are going beyond the ordinary after-school activities and looking to get involved in their communities. Currently, our affiliate, *Habitat for Humanity*, is doing its best to provide more opportunities for these youth volunteers. My service area covers small communities in rural Barry County, Western Michigan. Even though our affiliate has been around for many years, this is the first year that *AmeriCorps* members have served here. Part of my service has been looking for ways to incorporate youth volunteers into *Habitat*. Recently, I had the opportunity to work with a group of young kids from the local 4-H Club, ages 5-18 years old. This group was writing a grant for funds to buy gardening equipment for 5 of our houses. They faced some substantial challenges trying to come up with an idea for the grant. The first time around their grant was denied, but they didn't give up. They asked us to come and join their meetings to write another grant for a different idea. They are continuing to work at this project and are hopeful that their next proposal will be accepted. It is amazing to see children getting involved in helping others and we were so thrilled to partner with them through this project. They were excited, ready, and willing to get out there and serve their community. They also asked us if they could help plant shrubs, flowers, and perhaps even a tree or a garden at one of our homes this year. This is the first time this group of kids has been a part of *Habitat* and we hope that this experience will be the seed that grows into a lifetime of service for them.

Camp Fire USA Makes a Difference, One Child at a Time

I walk up the stairs to the fourth floor of a Grand Rapids elementary school. I'm on my way to a classroom packed past capacity with fourth and fifth graders. In total, there are 28 students crammed into this tiny room. The desks stretch almost from wall to wall. When I ask the students to stand in a circle in order to participate in the activity I've planned for them, it's uncomfortable, barely possible. They are restless and loud from the moment I step into the room until the moment I leave -- probably craving the individual attention that the overcrowding makes it impossible to give. An hour later, my throat is scratchy from shouting just to hear myself over the din. It's easy to leave a classroom like this one feeling deflated and overwhelmed, but **Camp Fire AmeriCorps** members face challenging classes like this every day. Despite the difficulties that come with serving in inner-city schools, our **AmeriCorps** team excels at connecting with kids in meaningful and lasting ways. Comonique, a part-time member, shared the following story about a little girl she was able to engage with on an individual level: Keicha was a first grade girl who had an incredibly smart mouth; by this, I mean that she was both very intelligent and successful academically, but also that she was constantly using her mouth to insult, scream, and swear at her peers. Comonique confronted the problem. She explains, "I had a talk with her and just let her know that she is a bright and very intelligent little girl and does not have to talk to people any kind of way to prove herself to anyone. I told her to try to think of at least two positive things to do or say to someone each day and watch how they will thank her or let her know that it was nice for her to do that. She understood what I was telling her and it really paid off. She runs up to me every day and tells me what positive thing she said or did for someone." Pam, another part-time **AmeriCorps** member, shared her perspective on the outcome of her service. She said, "I taught Alexzavier how to tell time, I taught Sharmon how to write his name, and I deepened my relationships with each child in my group. This month was so wonderful to experience!" Although sometimes our task is daunting -- things do go wrong and we feel frustrated or exhausted -- ultimately, our **AmeriCorps** members are able to recognize that they are making significant contributions to their communities.



Enabling a community to say goodbye



Distributing snacks and water from the back of the Red Cross Emergency Response Vehicle during the Gerald R. Ford Funeral proceedings in Grand Rapids.

Upon learning of former President Gerald R. Ford's death, **AmeriCorps** members serving with the American Red Cross of Greater Grand Rapids went into response mode. As one would expect, events surrounding a Presidential funeral require a strong security presence and a lot of planning. The funeral events for President Ford were no exception. Due to the unplanned nature of disasters, the American Red Cross is always prepared and ready to provide for the basic needs of people who are in an unusual or emergency situation. Only a short time before the funeral proceedings were set to begin in Grand Rapids, the American Red Cross of Greater Grand Rapids received a request to provide food, snacks, and beverages to on-duty security personnel several times a day. The American Red Cross, with the help of the **Together We Prepare AmeriCorps** members, was able to respond in a big way. Over the course of two days, four Emergency Response Vehicles (ERVs), driven and staffed by **AmeriCorps** members, delivered food, beverages and snacks to the on-duty security and emergency response workers. This service allowed these personnel to take breaks while remaining nearby in case they were needed. During the nearly 15 hours that

President Ford laid in repose at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library on Tuesday, January 2nd and Wednesday, January 3rd approximately 57,000 people waited patiently in a line that at times was six to nine hours long, many waiting well into the nighttime hours. The line of people would not be dissuaded by cold weather or the estimated wait time. The cold weather and long lines during the overnight hours caused concern at the American Red Cross of Greater Grand Rapids. The concerns included cold weather-related first aid needs and people without water to keep them hydrated. In response, late that night, **AmeriCorps** members Nevada and Joe loaded thousands of bottles of water into an ERV, drove downtown, and distributed the water to those in line. In total, 115 American Red Cross volunteers and 9 **AmeriCorps** members assisted with food and beverage distribution and were on standby to provide first aid to large numbers of people, if necessary. This was a unique time in the history of Grand Rapids, a unique opportunity for the **AmeriCorps Together We Prepare** members and a unique honor to be asked to assist as a "Grand Rapids President" was brought home.

Oscoda County 4-H Friend to Friend Mentoring Magic

“We have simply become good friends to one another. In addition to doing things together, we talk about a lot of things.”



Merianne and her mentor show their 4-H spirit at an activity.

The Oscoda County MSU Extension Friend to Friend *4-H Mentoring* program has celebrated National Mentoring Month for the past 2 years with a Winter Beach Party to recognize mentors, celebrate friendships, and just have fun in our community. With 14 current matches in a small, rural community we are ecstatic to be making a difference. A big part of the Beach Party is recognizing our mentors. A letter of support titled “Formula for a Friendship” from mentor Jeanne and mentee Katrina stated, “We have simply become good friends to one another. In addition to doing things together, we talk about a lot of things. We care about one another by showing kindness to each other and we show gratitude for our friendship.” What more could one ask for? When mentor Jeanne asked Katrina if she would recommend the Friend to Friend program to her classmates, she responded quickly saying, “Definitely, you get a new friend, have fun, and laugh together. It’s a BLAST!” Jeanne agreed, “It’s a blast!”

This poem written by a Mentor captures what Mentoring is all about and the impact this match has had.

“She is my rock”

Not just in the sense that she is my support and strong willed,

but in the sense that she is a treasure.

She is one of those rare pebbles you might find on the beach
sparkling in the sun.

You know, the one you can see 20 paces away,
and you race to it and pick it up in wonder.

How special this rock is from all the others!

You stare in amazement at its beautiful exterior,
somewhat smooth, a little rough, yet 100% mesmerizing.

Then you start to wonder...

What has this precious stone been through?

What are the elements in her life that have broken away
some of that rough surface to bring out that sparkle that is hidden inside?

Family? Friends? Teachers? Mentors?

The only thing that I am certain of is that inside is a gift
more magnificent and valuable than any diamond and it is waiting to get out.

The grand finale event, thanks to Mentor T.J., was a recognition CD with pictures of all involved with our program to the song Lean on Me which brought about many smiles and a few tears celebrating the success of Mentoring in Oscoda County.



AmeriCorps Member Finds Fulfillment in Her Service

My experience as a **Michigan AmeriCorps Partnership** volunteer at the Family Life Center in Detroit has shown me a side of life I have only read about in books. The Family Life Center works to promote families and improve their functioning on the East side of Detroit. This is done through a drop-off childcare center, case management, family therapy, and literacy tutoring. Most of my days are spent doing case management for our clients. One experience that will stick with me forever was a client who was about the same age as myself and had two young children. The landlord of the apartment she was in had not turned on the heat and it was getting cold outside. She told me about how she was trying to heat her apartment with her oven. Then she told me about her search to find a job and how no one was looking to hire a single mother of two. She was holding her youngest a girl less than a year old and you could hear congestion in the baby and see the frustration on the mother's face. This is something that you cannot understand unless you experience it. I did not grow up in a rich family but food, heat, and a place to stay were never in jeopardy for us. Here was a young lady trying to make ends meet for her family, and yet it seemed the world was against her. I was able to help her find part-time employment and a place to live with heat. When I was calling around, she told me about how she had been trying to get assistance at several other places but that, "it is hard to get people that have heat to think about those who don't." I have thought about that comment many times over the last month. As I sit in my heated office, it is hard to think about what it would be like to live without heat. I have come to realize that there are people out there who are going without basic necessities because no one is there to help connect them to the correct services, or not enough services are being provided. This experience and many other experiences have shown me that my volunteer service is necessary even if all I did was help that little family to live in a place with heat this winter. Getting out of my comfort zone and going to the East side of Detroit has given me experiences that cannot come from any book or lecture. It has truly changed the way I view life because I now realize that everyday, people are out there fighting just to get the basics; basics that I, and so many others, have taken for granted our entire lives. I'm so grateful that AmeriCorps has given me the opportunity to have this experience



Service for the King

Every January, the **Arab Resource Corps (ARC)** flies its **AmeriCorps** members from around the country to Dearborn, Michigan for a 4 day training retreat. This year, the last day of the retreat was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day and **AmeriCorps** members had a great opportunity to serve in the Metro Detroit area. City Year hosted the service event with an energetic rally Downtown Detroit followed by satellite service projects around the city. The first story is by *Ray Joubran*, a first year **AmeriCorps** member serving with the American Arab Heritage Council in Flint, Michigan. The next story is by *Lynn Blasey*, a second year **AmeriCorps** member serving at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Both of these stories take place on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 2007.

Being an **AmeriCorps** member is one of the most exciting endeavors I've ever taken on. There is a lot to do and many great people to do it with. For example, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day I was with a group of energetic people who were positive and ready to serve at the Ronald McDonald House for Kids and their Parents in Detroit. Our mission was to clean. We scrubbed above, below, and even behind everything we found that needed cleaning. We even cleaned over stuff that was already cleaned, or so it seemed.

This was my first experience as an **AmeriCorps** member on a service day. Everyone was lively at the rally and we were so happy we began to sing and clap! After the rally, my group piled back into their cars and headed to a Food Bank in Pontiac. The roads were slick so we were very careful driving such a distance. Upon our arrival, the group was given a brief introduction to the Food Bank and its mission. We were then led on a tour of the facility and it was explained that items stored there have a very quick turn around rate. Our mission was to make family friendly food boxes for distributors to hand out to needy families. We chose the contents of each box from several enormous cardboard tubs; 2 of beverages, 2 of canned goods, 1 of candy and snacks, 2 of condiments, and 2 of dry goods like pasta. The process was chaotic but we certainly had a wonderful time! In the end we packed over 800lbs of food, enough to feed many families in need. Service projects are an important part of an **AmeriCorps** member's year of service. By incorporating a service project into the orientation and initial training of **ARC AmeriCorps** members, it allowed individuals to take their experiences back to their places of service around the United States and better serve their communities.



AmeriCorps ARC members
packing boxes at the food bank

Suspending Bridges for Suspended Youth

“students are engaged in academic, fitness, vocational, and behavioral lessons.”

Have you ever wondered what happens when students are suspended from school? Serving as an **AmeriCorps** member with the *Faith in Youth Partnership*, Nick coordinates a school-affiliated program that offers parents and students an alternative to out-of-school suspension. While serving their suspension at the Bridge, students are engaged in academic, fitness, vocational, and behavioral lessons. On a short-term basis, the Suspending Bridges Program (SBP) offers a mentoring environment for students to keep up with their homework, and more importantly, ensures that students are not home alone getting into more trouble during their suspension. Long term, the program seeks to instill a positive outlook in the minds of middle school students, equipping them with tools to make good decisions in the future. Without their knowledge, Nick and Brandon’s relationship started on the basketball court during The Bridge Youth Ministry Center’s after-school program. On the surface, Brandon appeared to be a nice kid and a good basketball player. However, off the court, Brandon had a persistent, angry demeanor surrounding his story, Nick inquired at school discouraging. Brandon seemed to be a discouraging behavior. Nick made it his mission to help Brandon in any way that he could. Then Brandon received his negative occurrence that would turn out to be for the better in the end. Brandon’s first two suspensions were for fighting; his third – a ten day suspension – was for choking another student much smaller than himself. The report on Brandon from school administrators was disheartening; they tried to persuade Nick not to take Brandon for his third suspension, citing his sliding slope of negative behavior. Nonetheless, Nick could not accept that Brandon, or any student for the matter, was unreachable. Therefore, in the context of the Suspending Bridges Program, Nick’s relationship with Brandon quickly deepened. After building rapport with Brandon, primarily through their common interest in basketball, Nick was able to challenge and guide him through the lengthy suspension. Over the course of ten school days, Nick challenged Brandon not only in academics but through community service, vocational exploration, goal setting, and anger management. His attitude toward others and school began to change dramatically. Not only did he volunteer with a smile on his face during his hours of community service, but he studied diligently during his suspension and received a 94% on his Math test in a class he was nearly failing. As with all the students that pass through the SBP, Brandon developed a strategy to change his behavior in order to prevent a future suspension. Therefore, following his suspension, Brandon elected to continue anger management via a program at school with the support of his parents, the school, and Nick. Brandon is also a player on Nick’s basketball team, knowing full well that his participation is dependent on his behavior in and out of school. On top of that, he has joined the school wrestling team and recently decided to start volunteering as a group leader for the Bridge’s elementary level, Bible-school program. After his return to school, one of Brandon’s teachers commented, “The Suspending Bridges program has been a godsend for Brandon. Without it, he would have fallen hopelessly behind in school and probably would have given up altogether.”



Intervention: Helping a Teen in Transition

Serving as an **AmeriCorps** member with A Great Start Program and *Catholic Family Services* of Berrien, Van Buren, and Kalamazoo counties has been a life-changing opportunity for me. Van Buren County is located in Southwest Michigan with a population approximately 76,263 people, 3,889 of which are youth from ages 15-17. In this group, teenage pregnancy is 66 per 1,000 women (1999-2000 Census and Division for Vital Records and Health statistics, Michigan Department of Community Health). Knowing this information is one of the most valuable lessons that I have learned while serving. There is a lot of need in our society, especially with our youth, the future of our society. If we help them survive, improve their life styles, get an education, and help them achieve their goals, our society will have a better future. One youth that especially sticks out in my mind is our new client, Maria. Maria is 15 years old and has been faced with many challenges. Recently, her boyfriend was shopping for food at a local supermarket when immigration stopped him, arrested him, and deported him back to Mexico. Maria is a legal citizen of the United States but was left pregnant at 15 years old and did not know what to do. She went with a friend to the department of Child and Family Services to get help where a social worker referred her to our organization. There are many other cases just like this. As an active participant in our program, A Great Start, Maria is working toward her goal of finishing high school. As an **AmeriCorps** Case Manager, I have helped empower Maria to achieve her educational goals and become an independent person by offering her the parenting and life skills she needs to be a functional citizen. **AmeriCorps** members are changing lives. Maria now knows about the benefits of being a participant in our program. She is happy to have her case manager close to support her and empower her to make her dreams come true.



Warming Others with Love



Every now and then, as **AmeriCorps** members, we are faced with projects that deep inside we're really not sure our service will have a positive impact. Sometimes we wonder whether what we strive to achieve will be enough to make a difference, but when we do attempt a project, it is not recognition we are aiming to achieve, but the self-satisfaction we get from knowing we reached out and touched another person. During the month of December, Jeanie, a *Volunteer Muskegon's AmeriCorps* member pulled 20 Steele Middle School students together and approached them with a Service-Learning project proposal. Originally, the students were hesitant but later felt overwhelming pride when they saw the result of their hard work and dedication. Jeanie had her students draw out designs on paper that expressed their creative vision. The next day she came back and had them draw on fabric that she took home to stitch together. From their creativity, she created a warm, hand-made quilt that was donated to a young female soldier named Ricci who is about to be sent overseas. This soldier worked for the after school program at Steel for years before joining the Army. She is currently in training and will be sent to Germany when she is finished. Jeanie is pretty confident that our hometown hero will appreciate receiving the warm gift of love from a group of very proud students back home.





Students practice their reading skills with Gracie.

Gracie's Adventures at Rather Elementary

“Gracie is a 1 ½ year old, black lab/border collie mix, and she is a Certified Therapy Dog. Gracie started visiting school when she was 2 months old. At that time, we would sit inside the front doors and greet the students as they came off the bus in the morning. These early visits allowed me to see how great the need was for students to have interactions with pets. In September 2006, I spoke with the Principal at school and the ICAT Program Director about the possibility of using a Therapy Dog as an AmeriCorps Member. By the end of October we began visiting the school as a team. Our first goal was to start a reading assistance program called “Tales to Tails” for students who were reading below their grade level. For this program, teachers recommend students that may benefit from additional reading assistance. With parental permission students spend approximately 15 minutes each week reading with Gracie and me. 1st – 3rd grade students in this program bring the books that they are currently reading in the classroom. The students can pet Gracie while they read if they choose to. Judging by the smiles I receive from the students and the teachers, I think the program is working well. The other program I am developing has been named the “Pet Pals” program. Pet Pals is open to 4th and 5th grade students. I work with 2 students every Monday that struggle with attendance. Working with Gracie provides the motivation they need to make it to school on Mondays. Some of the students in this program struggle with making friends and have a low self-esteem. By maintaining the correct posture and style for giving Gracie her commands they are learning new social skills. Gracie and I also assist several teachers on a weekly basis. Besides the classes that I help in each week, Gracie and I do special visits in other classes where we demonstrate Gracie’s tricks and explain what a Therapy Dog is. Gracie also loves to head outside for recess! It is part of our Recess Fun program where children get to interact with her at their own pace. Gracie and I can often be found walking with students headed for the office or the nurse. Gracie loves to follow me wherever I go and students love to see Gracie at school. Their smiling faces always brighten my day.”

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