

# Michigan's AmeriCorps Newsletter

## Spring 2009



### What is AmeriCorps?

AmeriCorps is a national service program designed to strengthen citizenship and the ethic of service by engaging thousands of Americans on a full-time or part-time basis to help communities to address their toughest challenges. The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)

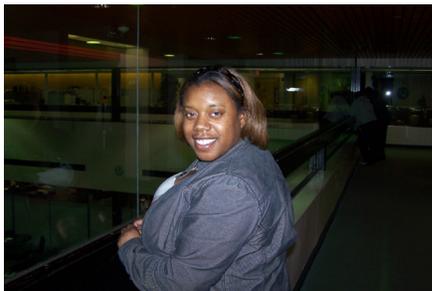
administers AmeriCorps at the federal level and works in partnership with states to develop service programs and create a community-based national service network. The Michigan Community Service Commission (MCSC) is the administrative agent for Michigan's AmeriCorps.



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### the readetroit corps



**The Next President**  
**Author: Joi Nycole Burks**

The 2008 presidential election brought excitement to the halls of

Mason Elementary School for staff, students, and volunteers.

On Monday, November 3rd, one day before the voting polls opened for registered voters, the students at MES participated in a mock election. They were able to vote for either the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain, or the Democratic candidate, Senator Barack Obama. All students in kindergarten through fifth grade participated. When fourth-grader Nia Collins saw the ballots, voting

booths, and boxes

setup in the halls outside the school library, she exclaimed, "This is so exciting for my class!" The student election results were announced at 1:30 p.m. by fourth-grader Kaylin Landrum and a celebration followed. The students colored computer-generated pictures of President Barack Obama and enjoyed watching his Inauguration. One second grader is already declaring that he is going to be the next Barack Obama!



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### Camp Fire USA AmeriCorps

#### **A Little Common Ground** **Author: Brooke Scott**

During my first few months as a Camp Fire USA AmeriCorps member, my goal was to get to know the kids on a more personal level. Unfortunately, sometimes having fun and learning took a back seat to discipline. One of the kids in my after-school group is a special needs student who was often ignored or teased by the other students. This would often cause him to lash out and say inappropriate things to get back at them. After disciplining the other students and addressing their actions, I expected the special needs

student's behavior to improve as well. Unfortunately, it did not. Instead, he started to pick on them!

Determined to find a way to break this negative cycle, I tried to find some way to bring these students together. After learning that the special needs student, as well as the other students, loved sports, I thought about how I could use that to help them get past their differences. During the next gym time, I asked the special needs student to help me with the basketball demonstration, which he gladly did. Seeing him in a leadership role helped change the other student's perspectives and

allowed them to get past their conflict so they could all play basketball together. From that moment on, he and the others have gotten along much better! Even though most of their interactions revolve around sports, they have learned to communicate without arguing, which is a huge relief to me. Sometimes all you need is a little common ground!



### City Year Detroit

#### **Defining Behavior** **Author: Tiffany Harris**

After my first month at Chadsey High School, a student approached me and requested tutoring in Math. She was a very quiet student, but bold enough to ask me for help. Once she started attending our program, I soon learned that she desired more than a tutor – she was also looking for a mentor. As I got to know her character and work ethic, I discovered she was outspoken about everything! She was very pessimistic, negative, and lazy about her schoolwork, and she wasn't putting forth much effort.

After two months, she became rude to the other students, and she began to reject help from other City Year

AmeriCorps members when I was busy. Left with no other choice, I asked her to stop coming to the program because she had become obnoxious, rude, and disrespectful to the other City Year members, students, and me. She challenged me for calling her obnoxious. She knew it was a negative word and asked me what it meant. Desperate for her to do anything academic, I told her to look it up and read it out loud to me. I also told her to look up the word "rude." As she read the words, she realized how characteristic they were of her behavior and made an agreement with me that she wouldn't be "obnoxious" anymore.

She soon began interacting more positively with other students and after a few weeks, she became more

comfortable with other City Year members helping her. Her academics have improved, her attendance is up, and she is using the help and guidance that is available to her. Last week, this shy, reserved student was even playing basketball with others in the gym! I believe it is something she may have never done until the other City Year members and I took the time to really help her.





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### Faith In Youth Partnership



**You Really Care!**  
**Authors: Jane Fisher and Trevor Pegues**

"I can ask for anything, even Star Wars figurines?" is something sixth grader Herlin Contreras could not wrap his head around. Each year,

Urban Youth Ministries provides a chance for their students to come together and be a family during the holidays. "I was excited and surprised Urban would do something like a Christmas Party and take us places," Herlin continued. "It's not just an afterschool program - you really care!"

Urban packed the vans full of students and headed out to Windquest, the host of the party. While the students finished eating dinner, Santa Claus entered the room with a bang. Still in awe, Herlin was eager to hear his name as

Santa called out for each student to come and pick up their present. Within seconds, he was beaming and shouting, "STAR WARS FIGURINES!" Herlin exclaimed how blessed he felt to be part of the Urban Family. Emilio Lopez and Darrell Johnson, seventh graders at East Middle School, agreed with him. Both said, "We felt like part of a real family at the Christmas party, and treated like one too!" The students explained that Urban's Christmas Party truly made Christmas a reality for them.

### 4-H Mentor Michigan Initiative

**The Perfect Match**  
**Author: Rachael Dasbach**

Matching mentors and mentees is one of the most important and potentially rewarding tasks I do as a 4-H Mentor Michigan Initiative AmeriCorps member. I was extremely nervous during a recent first meeting of one of these matches, as I was unsure if the match would be successful. The match had different interests but

similar schedules.

When they first began talking, the mentee mentioned that she sings in the school and church choirs. The mentor's face immediately lit up and she explained how she, too, enjoys singing in the church choir, and has done so for years. The mentor then said she has a side business making wedding cakes. This time, the mentee's face lit up as she talked about how she had made elaborate

children's cakes with her sister.

With these common interests, the mentor offered to have the mentee help her prepare wedding cakes this coming summer. The mentor is excited to teach her the skills and help with supplies so that, with practice, the mentee may even be able to sell her own cakes someday! On paper, this match appeared to be a challenge, but it ultimately turned out to be a success!

### Michigan Campus Compact

**MLK Day Success!**  
**Author: Bridget Ferrigan**

*"Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve."*

This past 2009 MLK Day of Service was one of the largest ever. At Olivet College, it was the first time service projects had been a part of MLK Day activities, partially due to the Community Engagement Fellowship grant and the MLK Challenge grant. Seven MCC member campuses, including Olivet,

received the grants and were able to fund over 28 projects, many of which Michigan Campus Compact AmeriCorps\*VISTAs helped to organize or participate in.

Despite challenges presented by winter weather, these projects generated over 815 volunteers who helped beautify local schools, promote literacy and math skills in K-8 classes, motivate youth towards higher education, clean up urban blight, and make blankets for local foster children, among other

projects. Because of the projects made possible by the CE Fellowship grant and the efforts of the VISTAs and MCC staff members, MLK Day 2009 was a huge success!





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### Michigan Campaign to End Homelessness

#### A New Perspective Author: Rebecca Benjamin

When I received my first batch of clients, I reviewed their history and couldn't help but wonder about each of their stories: Who were these individuals? How did they arrive at this point? Why did they need help? While it is easy to become jaded in this line of service, I was determined to maintain an open mind and do my best to help improve each client's circumstances.

One such client and her husband had been using a housing voucher

for the past three years. Neither of them had been employed for quite some time and they were in the process of permanently losing their young daughter. Their rent was several months overdue, and to make matters worse, they were being sanctioned by the Department of Human Services for time card fraud. I wondered, "How could I possibly help?" To begin, I took the time to listen and develop a relationship with this client, helping her to realize her own self-worth. In turn, she started to listen to me as well.

She knew she had made some bad choices, but it wasn't too late to start making better ones. I made a list of potential job contacts, which she followed up on and got her first job in over three years! She was overjoyed and it was amazing for me to be able to share in that excitement! Now when I talk with her, I hear a totally new and different person - a person who has hope for the future. What a privilege to be part of such a wonderful transformation!

### Superior AmeriCorps

#### Everyone Makes Mistakes Author: Cassondra Carlson

I tutored a fourth grade student for several weeks through the Great Explorations After-School Program. The student had been tutored in the past and strongly disliked tutoring. After a particularly difficult session where the student refused to do her work, I decided to have a discussion with her parents when they arrived to pick her up. It was very discouraging for all of us.

The next tutoring session started out very much the same way, with the student not wanting to do the work and not wanting to be there. I finally convinced her to participate in a small group where I was helping some students prepare for an upcoming test. Initially, she seemed

to be doing well, but got defensive when she didn't know an answer. She cried out saying everyone in the class thought she was stupid and everyone was constantly correcting her. 'No wonder she doesn't like tutoring,' I thought to myself.

I gently took her aside and explained that everyone makes mistakes, and shared that even I sometimes make mistakes in front of a class. I somehow managed to get a smile out of her (the first time I had ever seen her smile during tutoring). After our conversation, she did much better and we had one of our best tutoring sessions. At the end of the day, I went out with her to tell her parents how well she did. I could tell that positive feedback on her progress was not something that happened very often for either her or

her family. In the tutoring sessions that followed, I saw a confidence in her that I had never seen. She was no longer afraid to try, even if she didn't get the correct answer right away. At her last session, she expressed disappointment that her parents were coming to pick her up so soon! I am looking forward to working with her for the rest of the year and seeing the great things she can accomplish.





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### Community HealthCorps



#### **Sending a Message** **Author: Ellen Harnisch**

I recently had the opportunity to help a patient who has diabetes and needed his insulin and other medications as quickly as possible. I assisted him with the Kent Health Plan Medication Assistance Program application, as well as the online enrollment process. I asked that the patient be considered for emergency enrollment, which

meant he could get the needed medications at reduced prices within 48 hours. Thankfully, the patient was approved as an emergency enrollment.

I gave the patient his group numbers so he could go to the pharmacy and pick up the medications. However, the patient's information had not reached the Community Health Center headquarters in Lansing yet. When the patient tried to pick up his medications, the pharmacy did not show that he was enrolled in the medication assistance program. I called the pharmacy, which told me the patient's information was not in the system yet. Then I called the

headquarters in Lansing and explained the situation to them. They got the patient's information into the system within 24 hours. I immediately called the patient to update him on the situation.

The next day I received a voicemail from the patient. In the message the patient thanked me for advocating on his behalf and told me I really helped him and made a difference in his life. I now have that voicemail saved on my phone and whenever I'm having a difficult day, I listen to his message. It reminds me that by serving with AmeriCorps I am making a difference in people's lives and it inspires me.

### Huron Pines AmeriCorps

#### **Caring for our Planet** **Author: Brenda Irish**

Over the course of five days, I gave 14 hands-on water sessions to a total of 365 fourth grade students at Camp Newaygo. At my station, we shrunk the world's water supply to fit into a 5-gallon clear plastic container and separated out the various types of water found on Earth, including fresh water, groundwater, lakes and streams, frozen water, and atmospheric water. Using an eye dropper, the students painstakingly removed the world's available drinking water from the Earth's water supply. They were astounded that the amount of "drinking water" didn't come close to filling a baby food jar!

The disbelief on the students' faces confirmed the impact I made with my 'visual news' of the scarcity of available drinking water on Earth. To further the impact, I involved the students in building an aquifer where they learned about groundwater as a source of drinking water and how different human activities on the Earth's surface can impact groundwater. With cocoa powder, a Lego-built tanker truck, and food dye, we mimicked the application of fertilizers and pesticides and a chemical spill, intentionally "contaminating" our aquifer and drinking water well. Again, horrified gasps and expressions appeared on the students' faces as the "chemical spill" quickly made its way downward into our aquifer and

up into our drinking water well. It confirmed to me they were learning something new and important.

It's an honor, not to mention a great feeling, to teach children the importance of taking care of our limited natural resources. It's a hopeful feeling to think I made a difference in how these future environmentalists will interact with their natural environment as they grow into adulthood.





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### Michigan Primary Care Association

#### The Value of Experience Author: Marsha Hazen

As part of the Michigan Primary Care Association (MPCA) AmeriCorps program, I serve as a patient advocate at the Salvation Army Booth Clinic in Grand Rapids. Each month, all of the MPCA Community HealthCorps members get together to participate in a service project. These projects provide us with great opportunities to join, serve, and make a positive impact together in our communities.

This past January, I coordinated a service project during a much larger event: Project Homeless Connect (sponsored by the Grand Rapids Area Coalition to End Homelessness). At this event, area organizations provided a variety of services to over 800 guests,

including medical, dental, vision, personal care, governmental assistance, and a hot meal.

Over 30 AmeriCorps members volunteered in various capacities, including as greeters, escorts, and food servers. After my service with AmeriCorps is completed, my plan is to become a dental hygienist so I volunteered in the dental area. Over 70 people contributed their time in the dental area, including nine AmeriCorps members. Together, we were able to screen 203 patients seeking services, treat 59 patients, and provide 45 service vouchers to individuals needing follow-up treatment. We also extracted 121 teeth! The event was supposed to end at 2:00 p.m.; however, we were determined to see everyone get the service they needed so we were still treating patients past 3:00 p.m.!

My specific role during the event was to work with the sterilization team, cleaning and sanitizing dental instruments.

This is exactly the kind of opportunity I was hoping to be part of when I joined AmeriCorps. I not only had a chance to network with dental professionals and volunteer in a field in which I am interested in pursuing a career, but I am also part of a team that makes a big difference in the health of an underserved population in our community.



### Marquette Alger Regional Educational Service Agency



#### Making an Impact MARESA - Author: Erin Rippi

As a first-year MARESA AmeriCorps member, I am serving at Gwinn High School in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. I am continually amazed by the different experiences AmeriCorps has offered

me. The majority of my service time is spent tutoring at-risk students in subjects like Geometry, Algebra, Physics, and English. The students who participate in my morning, lunch time, and after-school homework labs have shown immense improvement in several subjects. Specifically, I helped three students improve their Physics grades by working with them individually during and after school. The students were very concerned about failing their Conceptual Physics course, but with my help, they were able to achieve passing grade scores.

In addition to tutoring, I volunteered to take on the role of Student Council Advisor this year. One of the most gratifying experiences for me has been witnessing all the kids working together to achieve common goals. In November 2008, students coordinated a Can-a-Thon and donated over 2,000 pounds of food to a local food pantry! Parents and teachers commented on the significant amount of student participation this year as compared to past years. It was great to share this experience with the entire student body!



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### Michigan AmeriCorps Partnership



**Leaving a Legacy**  
**Author: Brooke Ormond**

Siena Literacy Center is an adult literacy center located in northwest Detroit that provides tutoring in reading, writing, math, and English as a Second Language (ESL) through the eighth grade level. We were working with a very outdated computer lab and software so I began trying to figure out how we

could get new technology at a minimal expense, but I constantly to hit dead-ends.

One day my mother called me after running into Monica Gayle, a Fox 2 News anchor. My mother told her what I was trying to do and Monica handed her a business card insisting I contact her. I wrote to Monica and she forwarded my letter to Bill Gallagher at Fox 2 News Problem Solvers. He was an adult literacy tutor in college so this issue was close to his heart. Bill pitched the story to the news editors and a few days later, I got a phone call saying the story was on and that Bill may have gotten someone to donate computers. On November 6, 2008, Yohannes Bolds (a former AmeriCorps VISTA member)

called me and told me she had the resources to get us refurbished computers! I was thrilled!

The next week, Bill Gallagher came out with Fox 2 News Problem Solvers and filmed the story. As a result of this computer donation, our efficiency has increased tremendously. Every staff member is now able to complete tasks on their own computers, without having to travel to the lab. The mission of Siena Literacy Center is to work with adults in the area and help them learn to read. Updated technology is a necessity and I know these computers will be an asset to the center long after my term of service has expired!

### Char-Em ISD



**A Whole New Culture**  
**Author: Kristin Belfy**

As I enter Ellsworth Elementary, I hear "Jam na? Mi jam koo dume!" And Megan calls out, "Sanuko, Mrs. Belfy." "Sanuko Megan, Jam na," I reply, as we exchange greetings in Fulfulde, a native language of the remote village of

Tongo in Cameroon, Africa. Two years ago, my sister was in the Peace Corps, and I had the opportunity to visit her. Now I am able to share this opportunity with the children of Ellsworth Elementary through pictures and stories of the people of Tongo.

My sister and I first held a presentation on her service in Africa, but soon, the small presentation turned into a whole new culture at Ellsworth Elementary! The students were so intrigued by the artifacts, pictures and videos of our experiences, the small event turned

into a school-wide project. This enthusiasm led us to hold a three-week class to teach them more about the language and culture of Tongo. The students learned their ABC's, 123's, and basic conversational phrases that pertained to school activity in the native language. I'm glad to know that through my AmeriCorps service, I have been able to bridge the gap of culture in these small villages and show the true spirit of education and passion that individuals have for life!



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### Together We Prepare

#### **We are a Team!** **Author: Ben Grostic**

It was only my second feeding run in an Emergency Response Vehicle (ERV). However, DR 238-09 was closing down as the hurricane relief effort was coming to a close. As Dick skillfully drove the ERV through our assigned neighborhoods in Orange, Texas, his wife Judy and I anticipated the tasks we needed to do when he stopped the vehicle. It was nearing dusk and we were still nowhere near the end of our route. Judy asked Dick to call our kitchen manager to tell him we would be returning late. Dick called the kitchen manager to say we would wash our food cambros (insulated

storage containers) by ourselves upon our late return so the other Red Cross volunteers could leave. We didn't want to make the other volunteers mad at us by having to stay because of our late arrival. The manager agreed to the plan.

I had enjoyed mobile feeding that day, but was getting tired. I was even more exhausted knowing we now had to wash all our cambros and the ERV without help from the other volunteers, although that is how it goes on a national disaster assignment. Sometimes the work seems endless... We pulled into the kitchen after dark to discover many of the volunteers waiting for us. I asked if the manager had informed

them earlier that they could leave, and they responded that he had. Nevertheless, they had waited anyway! "We are a team," they said, "and we wouldn't leave you three to wash cambros all by yourselves." What a great experience that was for me on my first disaster assignment. We are a team, and as long as we can stick around to help each other out, good things will get done!



### Downriver CARES

#### **Big Brother** **Author: Laura Richardson**

I serve in the Guidance Center's youth mentoring program where I match youth with a responsible adult mentor. It is always great to see what impact mentoring has on the youth, but I also enjoy seeing how the adults benefit from the relationship as well. After the loss of his brother, Lee decided to become a mentor. He wanted to honor his brother by serving as a "brother" to someone in need. Lee began mentoring at The Guidance Center in 2006. Since then he has mentored three at-risk youth receiving mental health services at The Guidance Center.

Lee currently mentors a nine-year-old boy named Timothy. This past winter, they went ice skating together. At first, Timothy was very unsure of himself and kept looking to Lee for approval. As Lee supported and encouraged him, Timothy gained the confidence and courage to skate without holding the wall. Lee also talks about life lessons with Timothy and teaches him manners and people skills, such as looking people in the eye and giving a firm handshake. He stresses the importance of community service and took Timothy to volunteer at a Thanksgiving food drive. Timothy's mother has even noticed that since Timothy has been matched with Lee, he is more open

and communicates better. She is thankful for Lee's presence in their lives and calls him a part of their family. Timothy is thriving under Lee's positive attention and Lee is also benefiting from having a "little brother" through their mentoring relationship.





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### AmeriCorps Alums



#### **Staying Connected** **Author: Penny Beeman**

The Ionia Chapter of AmeriCorps Alums may be a small group, but its members are very active. They offer ongoing support to a volunteer youth organization called the Ionia

Kids Club. Members of the Ionia County AmeriCorps team started the Youth Service Club in 2002. The Alums continue to coordinate, supervise, and track activities for Kids Club, and I, as the Alum Chapter leader, serve as the Kids Club Coordinator and oversee all club functions. Other Alums provide resources and supervision for service projects that are planned by the youth who attend weekly meetings.

Some of our projects include Valentine Survival Kits in February,

Global Youth Service Day-Sweep the Streets in April, Make A Difference Day in October, and Holiday Hope Chest in December. AmeriCorps Alums also planned Ionia's first MLK Day event this past January. We planned a soup and service event for the community with guest speakers, music, and a service project. Participants included 57 diverse community members from all walks of life. We look forward to working with other volunteers to plan an even bigger event next year!

### Volunteer Muskegon's AmeriCorps



#### **The Power of Hope** **Author: Christy Fieber**

I have seen the power of hope in three special education students whom I currently tutor. In each of these cases, hope was considered an extremely foreign concept. I used to have 90 minutes every day where I was considerably unoccupied. A frustrated special education teacher approached me and asked if, during that downtime, I would be willing to work with these three students. He said they retain very little information you give them and

his only expectation is for them to have basic survival skills. I was bothered by his lack of hope, as he is someone who has dedicated his life to special education students. But then, I thought, they now have the opportunity to vastly improve their quality of life.

During our first meeting, my goal was simply to get to know them better and understand their individual needs. I was surprised to see how much they actually did retain. They told me stories in great detail about their childhoods, such as who they sat by on the school bus in kindergarten. After introducing myself by name, one student, Jessie, asked, "How do you spell that?" I replied, "F-i-e-b-e-r." He wrote it down as quickly as I told him. He carries it with him and uses it whenever he can't recall on his own. He has only returned to the piece of paper once.

We began doing a computer program that tests their math abilities. Within two days, all three students had surpassed addition and were on to basic multiplication. We are now into higher multiplication and division. We read through economic and history books in order to work on comprehension, then recall ideas through summary questions. They are almost able to summarize an entire chapter with ease. What has impressed me most is their enthusiasm and willingness to learn. After years of being given little chance to impress, they are not taking this time for granted. They clap, cheer, and give verbal congratulations anytime one of their peers gives a correct answer. What a joy to be part of the learning process of these students!



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### Program List and Contact Information

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#### Superior AmeriCorps

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### Member Council 2008

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Kathleen Grandy  
Downriver CARES AmeriCorps

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