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Lending a hand: Teens spend the holiday season volunteering

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When 19-year-old Karissa Kinner of Rochester began volunteering her time serving food at a St. John's Breadline four years ago, she learned much more than she thought she would.

"I was scared, and then I was happy because I was helping other people," she said.

Though Karissa, now stationed in San Diego with the U.S. Navy, isn't able to return to the breadline to help serve meals during this holiday season, she represents the many teens who do.

Teens who volunteer put in many hours without pay for various reasons.

For Sacred Heart-Griffin sophomore Katy Johnson, the compensation comes from helping people in need. It's also a family affair.

Katy and her mother, Brenda Johnson, are part of Helping Hands Homeless Shelter — a nonprofit organization that helps provide the essentials, such as "food, shelter, emergency assistance, rehabilitative programs, case management, employment, housing, and life skills training," according to the organization's Web site. Helping Hands provides daily meals, plus special Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners.

Brenda Johnson, the executive director of Helping Hands, does everything. She makes sure the agency runs smoothly and on budget, and helps with fundraising, grant-writing and community activities. Even though Brenda gets paid to work at the shelter, she does not require her kids to help out.

"I typically try to get the kids to be more active, but it's my job — I can't force it on them. They have to want to be involved," she said.

Katy didn't need to be forced. She said she began volunteering at Helping Hands four years ago, to help out those who don't have as much. She serves a few times a month.

When she first began volunteering at Helping Hands, it took Katy awhile to get used to the atmosphere and working with people who were not as well-off.

She does not have a specific task. She says she does whatever she can to help, anything from helping at fundraisers to serving food.

"With the paying job, you're there because you want to get paid," Katy said. "(With) volunteering, you're there because you want to be there."

Impact

Back at the breadline, staff worker Cienda Barges says most teens volunteer for service hours that are required by school clubs and church groups — or simply to give back.

Serving hot meals twice a day, the breadline serves about 208,000 meals per year, according to its Web site.

During the holiday season, between 100 and 150 teens or young people volunteer at the breadline. Tasks include working in the dining room, preparing food, cleaning dishes or working with herbs.

Jeff, one of the many people helped by the breadline believes volunteering is very beneficial for young people.

"It's nice, it's good that teens and young people volunteer," he said. "It could be educational and teaches them to stay in school."

Jeff said the teen volunteers at the breadline are kind, polite and enjoy simply saying hello. He said he believes the young people who volunteer disprove the stereotype of teens being lazy and uncaring.

"If they were lazy, they wouldn't be here — and, plus, it's a hard job," he said.

Chris Maxey, a junior double major in political science and sociology/anthropology at the University of Illinois Springfield, said he recently began volunteering at the breadline to fulfill 20 hours of community service required by his Poverty, Law and Justice course.

Maxey, 21, said he soon found volunteering is much more than just putting the hours down on a piece of paper. He said he was shocked to find the standard of living some coming for meals withstand.

"I was surprised how many elderly, homeless people there were (at the breadline)," Maxey said.

"It's incredibly wrong. At a certain age, you should begin to meet certain standards of living — and it's just wrong."

Chris's job entails anything from cleaning off tables, cleaning dishes, serving food or mopping floors.

He said the best part of volunteering is that the people are being fed and "get a warm place for a couple of hours."

Chris also said another benefit of volunteering was "experience."

"Everyone should take part in a required service of volunteering, even if it's for an afternoon because they learn about other people's situations," Chris said. "A lot of kids don't understand how lucky they are."

Brittany Limper is a junior at Sacred Heart-Griffin.

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