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GUEST COMMENTARY

Service learning is a million dollar idea

BY MADELINE CARRERA

SPECIAL TO THE KENOSHA NEWS

Service learning. It's a million-dollar idea that's helping the lives of many every day right here in Kenosha.

Well, it's more than just an idea. It's a million dollars in action on the part of Gateway students to serve others.

Literally, \$1 million of value added to our communities, according to The Independent Sector, a leadership network for non-profits which estimates the value of a volunteer hour nationwide and for every state. The total value of Gateway students participating in service to our communities hit \$1 million in May, representing the work students have done since the Service Learning Center opened in late 2010. Six students started out that year; that has grown to more than 700 each of the past two years, providing about 10,000 hours of expertise annually to 300 community groups and the people they serve.



Madeline Carrera

Service varies from information technology to nursing, graphic communications to haircuts as well as a number of other areas in between. They provide services such as blood pressure screenings, developing marketing materials, setting up computers and providing initial information technology support, giving haircuts to veterans and designing indoor and outdoor landscapes for facilities, to name a few.

Many times, this is work that organizations might otherwise be unable to access because of limited resources.

A total of 56 of those organizations in the 2016-17 academic year were from Kenosha County. A few of those include Every Child's Place, the Shalom Center and the ELCA Urban Outreach Center. Students from the Gateway programs of early childhood, information technology, nursing and horticulture worked on those projects.

Why is it important to track these hours? Because of the many ways students engage in service, this provides a meaningful way to illustrate the impact they have on the community – which should be valued and celebrated. Projects include those providing direct service, indirect service or background work which can't be easily seen.

The work is just as meaningful to students as it is to the groups and people they serve. Since they are applying what they've learned in a classroom to a real-world setting, they gain confidence as they use those skills to help others. They learn the soft skills that can be gained only through working with actual clients. That is experience they can use to succeed in their future career.

Tracking these hours also helps students to know they are not alone. They are part of an even greater movement by others in their community who also see the value in helping others.

They realize service to others benefits their community.

They are part of a million dollar idea.

Madeline Carrera is the Service Learning coordinator at Gateway Technical College.