

BIG TOWN **BIG HEART**


Learning and serving

Nonprofit connects students and community

Student volunteers give their time to an East Harlem service program focused on healthy eating, fresh food, composting and local farming.

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New York City high school students must fulfill a certain number of community service hours before graduation. The required number of hours varies from school to school, but the community service requirement is non-negotiable.

Seems like it would be easy to find volunteer work, right? Actually, it's not.

"When my kids were in high school, there were limited opportunities to access community service," says Kathy Soll, founder of Students for Service, a nonprofit that brings teens from across the city together to work on community projects. For Soll, it was important to offer students a more engaging experience.

"I realized that what was missing was the opportunity for kids to have an ongoing project, one where they could meet kids

from different neighborhoods and form friendships over time," she adds. "Service provides an incredibly unique vehicle for bringing kids from the five boroughs together on a level playing field."

Furthermore, when service is social, it becomes a fun and enriching activity, not just another high school requirement. Soll says, "As an added bonus, volunteering boosts a student's academic performance. It also increases the likelihood that he or she will vote as an adult and remain civically engaged."

Soll has always been an active community member. She was the PTA president of Public School 199, ran several fund-raising committees at her children's schools and helped renovate a playground in Riverside Park. When her daughter, Lauren, was a junior in high school, Soll served as Columbia Prep's representative to Joint Schools New York, a consortium of independent schools. Soll also

became involved with City Year, an education-focused nonprofit organization that partners with underserved public schools to provide intervention for students most at risk of dropping out.

"City Year delivered a great opportunity to create an ongoing service program for teens in both public and private schools. Additionally, the young adult City Year corps members are excellent models for voluntary (as opposed to mandatory) service," she says.

Soll and City Year offered five projects that year, including aiding school improvement and literacy initiatives, shadowing a corps member for a day and participating in Martin Luther King Day of Service and National Day of Service activities.

The projects were a great success. True to Soll's idea, the teens enjoyed committing their time to one initiative and forming friendships with students from other schools. Soll's collaboration with City Year was the

impetus for creating Students for Service.

Soll founded the nonprofit in 2010 with help from her friend, Chana Chenfeld. The group reached out to organizations in specific areas, including environment, hunger outreach and literacy. They contacted numerous private and public high schools, created a website and posted the opportunities on the Department of Education's electronic mailing list and other websites. It worked.

Over the past three years, Students for Service has worked with many of New York City's nonprofits to engage nearly 1,000 students in 45 projects. Last year, the organization ran 23 days of service through five outreach initiatives: hunger/poverty, literacy, urban agriculture, the environment and community improvement.

This fall, Students for Service is kicking off Teens for Food Justice, an initiative to build community outreach programs

around a greenhouse/urban farm. They are partnering with Bedford Stuyvesant New Beginnings Charter School (K-6) and NY Sun Works, a nonprofit organization that converts classrooms into greenhouses in urban schools.

"We will create teams of teen volunteers to help build, operate and manage the school greenhouse on an ongoing basis. Our plan is to create a hub for community outreach that will focus on healthy eating and opportunities for better living in the community," Soll adds.

"Teens for Food Justice pulls together all of our objectives by providing ongoing engagements with a common focus. Our goal is to connect our volunteers to one another and to the community they are serving and to give them skills for life," she says.

For more information or to volunteer with Students for Service, visit www.studentsforservice.org.

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