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Charitable lessons

PNW class project is a merry Christmas for the homeless

By JEFF MAYES - Staff Writer Dec 9, 2018 Updated Dec 9, 2018



Photo by Jeff MayesStudents in a Small Group Communication class at PNW gave their final presentation on their efforts to the clients of Keys to Hope last week. From left are Gabriela Cains, Claire Hagan, Mitchell Prowicz, Dee Moore, Citizens Concerned for the Homeless Executive Director Jim Musial, Faris Daikhi, Tim Clapp, Daniel Seely and Grace Learning Cent program coordinator Natalee Stewart.

WESTVILLE – Jim Musial has been doing social work for several years now, and he knows that hearing "No" is part of the job. But for a group of Purdue University Northwest students, whose service-learning project was dedicated to helping the homeless, it came as a shock.

"Fundraising is a challenge," said Claire Hagan, one of the students in Carolyn Higgins' Small Group Communications class. "A lot of businesses said no, but we learned you don't worry about those. A lot more said yes, and those are the ones that matter. We're so thankful for them."

Musial said, "The great thing about this group was when they hit the wall. The hardest thing is to hear no, and you hear it all day long. But they stayed with it and it all came together in the end."

The goal of the project was to provide a real Christmas for the men and women of Keys to Hope, the community resource center in Michigan City overseen by Musial, executive director of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless.

"The goal was to help single men affected by homelessness," Faris Daikhi of Michigan City, another of the students, said. "We wanted to help them experience a real Christmas, a heartwarming holiday, like what we experience with our own families."

Musial said the clients of Keys to Hope are "a forgotten group at Christmas."

And a large one. There have been about 50,000 visits to the center in its first four years of operation. "They might need jobs, housing or ways to overcome barriers – financial, employment, maybe mental health or addiction – to jobs and housing," Musial said.

It's a noble goal, but not easy for college students, they admitted during their final presentation last week.

"We solicited gifts and we received a lot of things to give to these men," said student DeAndrea Moore. "But next time we will know to expedite communications and start collecting donations earlier. We learned with a lot of companies it can take months to approve a donation, they all have different rules."

Hagan said the problem was fundamental: "We were unaware of the extent of the work required."

"We were looking for directions, but nothing was handed to us," said Tim Clapp. "We expected a formula, but we had to figure it out for ourselves."

That was Higgins' plan all along.

"This class was not about the final product, but about learning to get things done," the associate professor said. "They were told what the project was, but students are not used to being in control. I had to say get going and get this done because people are relying on you. They finally said here's what we need to do; they figured it out; and they took off."

Hagan said, "It was all smooth sailing after we came up with a plan. After we changed from an auction, everything figured itself out."

The original idea was a Christmas tree auction – seek donations of trees, then auction them off.

"We changed the plan from an auction because there was just too much involved," said Gabriela Cains, another Michigan City resident. "But we decided to keep the Christmas tree idea. We asked for donations of gifts – clothing, caps, coats, blankets, toiletries, boots – and trees.

"Some of us put drop boxes in workplaces and some asked for donations. Then we will collect and wrap and deliver the gifts. We wanted to have a party for those men."

"We plan to wrap up the gifts in boxes for different sizes," Hagan said. "So everyone has something to open and it will all be in their size. We have \$290 in cash donations, plus all the things we were given. And we still hope to get more. We will also help decorate a tree and host the party for the men of Keys to Hope."

Clapp said more work is needed.

"There is still a lot of work to do, and we are still going for more donations. We're trying to provide affection for the less-fortunate in the community. We are motivated by our value of wanting to help the less-fortunate. We were all very committed to this."

Musial told the students to be proud: "These things you've collected might not seem like much, but these are things they have lost at some point and you are giving it back to them."

The collaboration between Citizens Concerned for the Homeless and PNW goes back six years, Musial said.

"I got a call from Purdue that Carolyn Higgins wanted to do some small group projects for a class, semester-long projects for non-profits. I thought, every year somebody does something for clients of CCH or Sand Castle, but let's do something for the men at Keys to Hope .. we wanted the kids to solicit donations and gifts, not frivolous gifts like makeovers or video games, but gifts the men could really use."

Natalee Stewart, coordinator of the Grace Learning Center, helped on the project and was impressed with the students, adding past classes have done things like fundraisers, website design and producing informational flyers.

"We gave them ideas and let them run with it," Stewart said. "I wanted it to be a learning project for them. And whatever we got from them is valuable because we didn't have it before. And for them, it's a sense of satisfaction you can't get anywhere else."

That's why Higgins said she will continue to keep service a part of the class.

"I can teach this class any way I want. Other professors have asked why I use the service component, but I can't imagine not using it. They could do a fictitious project but that would be wasting their time. I hope it was fulfilling and worthwhile for them.

"For these 100 men it will be something special. I hope they use this as an opportunity to help others in the future. I love when students come back years later, and talk about projects they've worked on, and boards they serve on – I hope I planted the seeds that inspired them. I hope they get bit by the service bug."

Musial agrees with that sentiment. A former attorney who changed to social work several years ago, he said this type of work makes you a different person.

"The job has changed me in many ways," he said. "I'm more selfless, more grateful for all that I have. You get a different perspective on who you are and what you have when you work with people who have nothing.

"Helping people gives you something that can't be measured. When you help someone else be successful in their lives, you feel an overwhelming sense of fulfillment."

Clapp and Mitchell Prorwicz said the students all felt that spirit.

"We made some mistakes. It was useful to learn from them, but not elaborate on them. We are satisfied with what we achieved," Prorwicz said.

Clapp added, "The defining moment was when we bounced back from little roadblocks. We are grateful for all the donations we secured, and I'm proud of what we accomplished."

Student Daniel Seely added: "We ended up by helping a lot of homeless men, giving them a Christmas they will be thankful for. And next time we will know to spread the word more, get the word out a little better."

Still time to help

The Purdue University Northwest students involved in the Gifts2Hope project are still looking for donations of gifts or cash for their Christmas party for the men of Keys to Hope. If you would like to donate, contact Jim Musial of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless, 219-879-2552 or mchomeless@ameritech.net.