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## These Kids Today

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# These Kids Today

**Abstract**

National Volunteer Week, an annual challenge and opportunity for all of us to engage with our communities, is April 6-12 this year, and recent data suggest that this could be a good opportunity to re-commit ourselves to rising to the many challenges these communities currently face. [*excerpt*]

**Keywords**

volunteer, college students, young people, poverty, homelessness, Gettysburg College, National Volunteer Week

**Disciplines**

Social Work



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## These Kids Today

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National Volunteer Week, an annual challenge and opportunity for all of us to engage with our communities, is April 6-12 this year, and recent data suggest that this could be a good opportunity to re-commit ourselves to rising to the many challenges these communities currently face.

According to the Report on Volunteering in the United States 2013, released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics on Feb. 25, volunteer rates dipped nationally last year to their lowest rate since the report was first released in 2002. More alarmingly, this report indicated that volunteer rates were at the very lowest among 20- to 24-year-olds (18.5 percent).

Are tomorrow's leaders losing interest in public service?

This is a disturbing trend, especially considering the stark need so many of our neighbors face in what is still a very tough economy.

In the context of these numbers, I am both heartened and humbled by the students with whom I work every day, who are demonstrably more committed to a life of service than I was at 20 or am at 50; in a dozen years teaching service-learning courses at Gettysburg College about homelessness and poverty, I have spent countless hours face-to-face and shoulder-to-shoulder with some of the finest human beings one could ever hope to meet, young people who don't need JFK to tell them to ask what they can do for their country.

These classes have involved more than 180 students in over 50 days of service at N-Street Village, DC Central Kitchen, and a host of other agencies serving those in need in our nation's capital. Members of these courses have also put in a total of more than 3,600 hours of service in the local Adams County, PA community, working at agencies including our local soup kitchen and homeless shelters, amongst many other opportunities, including the Campus Kitchens Project at Gettysburg College, a food rescue and redistribution program which was founded in part by students from this class.

More broadly, each year 1,400 Gettysburg College students -- more than half the student body -- get involved in our local community and beyond, offering more than 30,000 hours of service annually.

But surely some over-achieving students volunteer in part to pad out their resumes, do they not? Such is one likely outcome of a culture of credentialing. While this may be true for some, however, many of these young people do these things not just to get into college, not

just for a course, and not just for a year or four years; many of them are choosing to build their lives around active, community-minded citizenship, whatever their eventual field of professional endeavor.

Taylor, who graduated last year, summed up a key aspect of what impressed her most about meeting and talking with people in need: "I've learned that I should no longer ignore the homeless people around me and that I should make the effort to smile; you never know what difference a simple hello can make in someone's life." Taylor offers us a small lesson, but one which may lead us to big changes in the way we understand the world and how just breaking out of our comfort zone to make a human connection puts us on the path to rising to Gandhi's challenge to becoming the change we wish to see in the world. Taylor is currently with Teach for America in New Orleans.

Eddie, who was a phenom on the ice with an enviable social life by any standard, was notable from his first days in my class as an amiable, out-going person who found it easy to make just the sort of connections Taylor suggests. Although hockey and his fraternity certainly mattered very much to him, there is much more to the guy, and after graduation he volunteered at the Father McKenna Center for the Homeless. Subsequently he moved to New Orleans to work for the St. Bernard Project restoring homes destroyed in Katrina. He didn't make any money, but he thoroughly enjoyed what he was doing and felt he made a difference.

I first met Maribeth in the fall of 2003, when she was a first year student in my course on homelessness. She built her college career around service both here and abroad, and after graduation she declined prestigious other offers to serve with the Peace Corps in Madagascar; she subsequently entered a career in humanitarian aid in locations as disparate as Turkey and Pakistan. Maribeth currently serves with Catholic Relief Services in the Central African Republic, where she strives to "make a difference in the world acting as a voice to people in remote places that says, 'you are not forgotten.'"

In the words of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, these inspiring young people "let their lives speak." We should all speak so eloquently and passionately about what really matters in life. National Volunteer Week gives us the opportunity to take a first step in this direction. Moreover, the lives of young people like Taylor, Eddie, and Maribeth challenge us to weave patterns of active citizenship into the very fabric of our lives.

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