

From Classroom



Maru-a-Pula School • The Taft School • Children's Community School



to Community

By Virginia Small

Students make
connections as they
translate knowledge
into service

Service has always played a significant role at Taft. Now students can broaden their commitment to community service in the classroom as well.



On a late autumn afternoon, Nick Tyson '09 and Jessica Yu '09 stand before a class of fourth and fifth graders at Children's Community School (CCS) in Waterbury. These weekly sessions at CCS are hands-on segments of an elective titled Service Learning, now in its second year. Located in an old red-brick building, this private school enlists children from the city's poorest families in a rigorous curriculum for pre-K through grade 5.

"Every single student is below or around the poverty level; their lives are at best tough," observes Ollie Mittag-Lenkheym '08, a student in last year's course. This school "gives these children...something to be happy about and something to look forward to. CCS also inspires and motivates their students to want to succeed."

Today, Tyson and Yu use their storytelling skills to engage the younger students in a discussion about another group of students who live and study at the Maru-a-Pula School in far-away Botswana. To learn more about the African students, CCS students come up with a plan to write them letters. They want to ask the faraway young people about their lives and to share stories from their own. The project's focus this semester is to strengthen ties among the three private schools. In the process, both Taft and CCS students are learning about people, culture and education in another part of the world. In turn, Maru-a-Pula students will receive support from their American peers and possibly gain more insights into American culture.

Back in a Taft classroom, seven students seated around a large circular table investigate service from an academic,

but also practical, perspective. Annabel Smith, Taft's chair of Global Service and Scholarship, leads a discussion about the logistics and implications of community activism. She draws diagrams on a white board as the class analyzes the potential "causal chains" involved in opening a hypothetical food bank. "How will volunteers be enlisted? Where should the bank be located? What are the local needs and how will you meet those needs?" She raises thorny issues, such as how to avoid "stigmatizing" of clients, and how to determine their eligibility.

As the exercise builds, students begin to see the complex issues inherent in setting what might seem like a simple goal for a volunteer effort. Then Smith introduces another analytic tool called a "needs overlap analysis." It's designed to assess the potential agendas of service providers and their constituents as a way to find common ground. She advises these budding volunteers to avoid making assumptions and to consider that the greatest need in a situation might be the least glamorous. For example, residents at a home for seniors might just want someone to share a conversation with them, while volunteers might prefer to lead an activity or provide entertainment.

"It's important to assess what is considered valuable, and by whom," explains Smith. The students are asked to think about these issues in the context of their own volunteer activities. Sam McGoldrick '09, another member of last year's class, believes that the most impact he made as a volunteer at a Waterbury soup kitchen was on a personal level. "Although we assisted with physical tasks, like serving



meals and organizing the food storage, the biggest help was probably in just making a personal connection with people who came there for a meal. It seemed to really brighten their day to have someone acknowledge them and talk with them. A lot of these people seemed really lonely.”

Recruited in January 2007 by headmaster Willy MacMullen '78, Smith exudes a passion for all aspects of service. She brought to her newly created position a background as a history teacher in the United Kingdom and East Africa, as well as experience in running community service programs in South Africa and Philadelphia. She believes that it's possible to create “a very powerful model” when a rigorous academic dimension and an experiential service component are fused. “This experiential form of learning fosters independence, critical thinking and compassion,” she says.

Student responses back this up. As Natalie Landis '08 worked at the Waterbury soup kitchen last year as part of the Service Learning class, she began to appreciate “a common humanity among all people. I came to realize that helping others could have an impact.”

Students also said they valued the insights they gained by reading works by contemporary authors, such as Ivan Illich, Jamaica Kincaid and Peter Singer, who explore social topics including poverty, human rights, education and health.

Barry Clarke '09 calls the class “an amazing, intriguing, life-changing experience—one that reinforced service in the community, heightened my view of existing global and local issues, and created a deeper passion for community service.”

“Service Learning is truly a class that is based on the ideal that you get in return what you put in. Each Thursday the class ventured into the heart of Waterbury in order to put what we had learned the previous days into action.”
-Ollie-Mittag-Lenkheym '08

"Do the intentions someone holds in their heart going into service matter? If one's heart is not in it, then their work might cause more harm than good. These are the tough questions we debated daily in class...."

Linking Taft, Maru-a-Pula and Children's Community School

As Taft students volunteer weekly within the bustling community school, they are asked to ponder larger questions. For example, what challenges do these disadvantaged youngsters confront in their homes and neighborhoods? How do these adverse conditions affect their ability to achieve academically? What motivators help them to overcome obstacles? Both Taft and CCS students also learn from trying to create bridges with the Maru-a-Pula students. For example, 20 percent of Maru-a-Pula students are orphans whose parents have died from the AIDS epidemic. "Sometimes it's difficult to talk to CCS students about this topic," Nick Tyson says. "So there's a learning curve in that process."

This is where the team approach comes in, says Smith. "Luckily we have the CCS social worker and teachers on hand to advise us on the best way to approach these difficult issues with different age groups." One aspect of the current project is to raise funds for Maru-a-Pula's AIDS Bursary Fund through a penny drive at CCS and a matching fund-raising effort at Taft. Students at CCS can see that there are children who have even less than they do, and for the first time for some, they can feel the rewards of giving instead of always feeling needy.

The Taft community has nurtured a close relationship with the Maru-a-Pula School for more than 25 years. The school's headmaster, Andrew Taylor, graduated Taft in 1972.

Each year, one Maru-a-Pula graduate attends Taft

as a postgraduate. The Botswana secondary day and boarding school enrolls 600 students and has earned international renown for its progressive, holistic and "color-blind" approach to education. Smith visited Maru-a-Pula last year and found it "an amazing place." She hopes to build upon those relationships not only among Service Learning students in this class, but also throughout the Taft community.

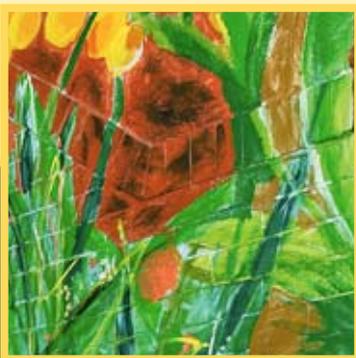
Smith sees many advantages in building ongoing relationships between the Taft and CCS communities. "Being in this environment is a great way for our students to connect with what's happening in the larger world. They're experiencing something rather than just reading about it." And it helps CCS staff and faculty to have "student teachers" come in on a weekly basis, since the school relies heavily on support from volunteers.

Connecting the Dots of Service at Taft

The Service Learning course represents just one aspect of Taft's effort to foster its motto: Not to be served but to serve.

"We're transitioning into a multifaceted definition of service that is more all-embracing and sustainable, that's beyond just dropping in as volunteers for a day," says Smith. She envisions a Taft curriculum that eventually includes service-learning components within virtually all disciplines. The goal would be "to enhance and emphasize the connections that naturally exist between key themes (such as poverty, human rights, education and health) and the academic program delivered through each department."

Smith wants to help "join the dots" to promote service across the whole school community. "These dots include se-



Maru-a-Pula School

...Through passages from newspapers and books, we looked deep into how each person can benefit others, where help is needed."

-Kathy Demmon '09

nior projects and independent study projects, electives, clubs and societies, athletics, trips and travel, visiting speakers, the *Papyrus*, all Greg Ricks' leadership work, summer reading, alumni events, parents, the board, Community Service Day organized by Roberto d'Erizans, all our community partners, the Volunteer Council run by Baba Frew, Orphanage Outreach trips to the Dominican Republic, Maru-a-Pula School in Botswana, our friends and colleagues in South Africa, and all of us and all our classes. We are all dots."

Ultimately, her vision is to provide ever more chances for students to experience life outside the Taft campus, learning about and being useful within the community.

According to students in last year's Service Learning class, there's much to be gained from performing community service while studying its implications in a larger context. Sam McGoldrick enthusiastically described the impact the Service Learning class made on him. "I learned about how to do community service effectively, and to understand what we can accomplish when we really consider the best ways to get involved." He was also eager to express his appreciation for Smith's approach. "She has brought to Taft a new energy about community service and has inspired a lot of enthusiasm for looking deeply at both local and global issues. Her own devotion to service has inspired me to want to involve myself in many ways. She's done a great job of broadening the sense of what we can do." 🙌

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"We attempted to record the stories of the students at Children's Community School through interviews, conveying their ethnic background, siblings, and the impact CCS has had on their lives. Simply put, these kids were amazing."

-Barry Clarke '08