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Service for Learning, Service for Life: DePaul's Vincentian Mission in Action

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The Steans Center: DePaul’s approach to community-based service learning has grown steadily through the Irwin W. Steans Center. A thriving part of DePaul since 1998, the Steans Center links about 3,400 students each year with more than 500 community partners, many of which provide individuals in need with access to education, housing, health care and food.

“The center works with all colleges and schools at DePaul to support faculty who integrate service learning and community engagement into the curriculum,” says Howard Rosing, executive director of the Steans Center. “We also offer an array of community-based employment opportunities, most of which engage students in critical analysis of how organizations address social inequality.”

Margaret McHenry (BUS ’12, MS ’13) serves as the chief financial officer of Worldwide Orphanage Relief Coalition (WORC), a nonprofit founded by Matthew Manning (LAS ’13) to foster collaboration between international orphanages and provide them with the resources they need to enhance the lives of their children and overall community. “My highest priority as WORC’s CFO, and also one of my biggest challenges, is finding a way for WORC’s mission to be reflected in our budgeting,” says McHenry. “As a budding organization, it is important that the funding we do receive is spent wisely and always with a resolute focus on our mission.”

McHenry’s service learning at DePaul began during her freshman year, working at Josephinum Academy, an all-girls school for underserved students, through the Steans Center’s Catholic Schools Initiative Program. “Then, through the DePaul Community Service Association, I connected with Vincentians in Action, which was pivotal to my community service experience; in December 2009, I traveled to Kenya to work with a women’s empowerment and environmental justice organization called the Green Belt Movement. Without those opportunities, I wouldn’t have tapped into my passion of social justice as early as I did.”

One of McHenry’s favorite experiences was being a Chicago Quarter Mentor for a class that focused on the intersection and interaction of poverty and wealth in the city. She says, “Professors at DePaul, where social justice and community engagement are such a huge part of our mission and values, are challenging the new generations of business leaders to look at their bottom lines in a much broader way. Knowing how our decisions affect others and how those effects are disseminated through the system is what’s most important.”

As a socially conscious businesswoman, McHenry finds St. Vincent de Paul to be a great role model: “In addition to being a great humanitarian, he was a terrific entrepreneur. He was a networker and avid fundraiser who used his business savvy to expand the reach of his work.”

Daniel Pasquini-Salazar (LAS MS ’10) is the program manager of the International Children’s Center of the Chicago-based Heartland Alliance, where he works with unaccompanied minors who are asylum seekers and refugees. Pasquini-Salazar spent a couple of years in the Peace Corps before entering DePaul to pursue a master’s degree in international public service. He participated in a credit-bearing study-abroad program in the Philippines made possible by the ongoing collaboration between DePaul and Adamson University, a Vincentian university in Manila. Pasquini-Salazar visited squatter relocation facilities and conducted a poverty and social impact analysis of the community development efforts he witnessed.

“Knowledge is created in the community and amassed in the university. It’s a sharing, a partnership,” says Pasquini-Salazar. He firmly believes in the importance of marrying practice to pedagogy. “It sounds very nice to be participatory, but the actual practice is very messy,” Pasquini-Salazar continues. “DePaul is unique because it connects the practice of reflection and theory with service. This was my thinking and the way I’ve tried to pursue my life’s work.”

Pasquini-Salazar gives credit to the Steans Center for helping to launch his career in public service. While working there as a part-time research assistant, he connected with La Casa Norte, a social service organization for the homeless in Chicago’s Humboldt Park neighborhood. La Casa Norte eventually hired him to work on its food security and nutrition programs.
The lasting impact

“What we view as service may be working at a soup kitchen, but it’s more than having the power in the hands of the person doing the service,” says Pasquini-Salazar. “One of the nice things the Steans Center offers students is the chance to engage with communities and see the impact, to learn about the ethical issues and the structural and endemic aspects of marginalization in real-life settings.”

“The center’s work is to push students not to think of service and community engagement as charity, but as a means to become leaders in transforming society to be more socially and economically just,” says Rosing. For many alumni and students, the service learning and community outreach opportunities woven into the academic rigor of DePaul’s degree programs brought their career goals into focus and helped them become part of the solution for society’s most vulnerable populations.

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