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What Are You Doing for Others?

By Traci Pearl and Sasha Elias, Upper School Teachers

For the past three years, students in the Upper School have taken part in a Day of Service in order to commemorate the life and work of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

By the time students reach the Upper School, many of them have a great deal of knowledge about the life and trials of Dr. King and other key civil rights activists. Starting with their own families and communities, students and teachers have examined how they can be activists in their own lives. Preadolescents and adolescents are often observed, rightly, to be self-centered in their journeys toward independence and responsibility. Participating in a Day of Service to commemorate Dr. King’s ideals pushes students to stretch the confines of their world beyond themselves and their immediate concerns. At a pivotal point in adolescent development, students are empowered to effect change in their own world. They are ready to take on activism in a new way; they are ready to respond to the question, “What are you doing for others?”

We begin the Day of Service by listening to a speech of Dr. King. In his Drum Major Instinct sermon, he said:

We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade … It’s a good instinct if you don’t distort it and pervert it. Don’t give it up. Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. (Amen)
I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity.

We hope our students will reach beyond the world of their own adolescent egos. We want them to think about how they can help their communities and to feel their own importance by giving to others.

Various age-appropriate activities allow us to reach the community in a different ways. Teachers place students into mixed-age groups, based on student interest. ‘Interaging’ provides opportunities within the group for leadership, ‘modeling,’ and bonding. Activities range from baking and making items to sell for charity to helping clean and sort toys for the organization Room to Grow. Students particularly enjoy working with children in our own Family Center, in Bank Street Head Start, and in the
Bloomingdale Head Start programs. Groups of students have also entertained senior citizens at nursing homes and have cleaned portions of Riverside Park and Central Park. One year, during a stormy winter, students used shovels, axes, and chisels to clear ice from stairs and walkways.

After the morning assembly, students meet with their assigned teacher leaders and parent volunteers. Students can ask questions and voice any concerns they have about the day. They may, for instance, have anxiety about how they will react when they see a sick child at the hospital, about whether they won’t be able to complete the task they are assigned, or even about negotiating group dynamics during the ac-

An assembly line preparation of sandwiches.

“I grew because I got to see myself in these kids shoes and I couldn’t have done that without them.” 11/12s student

“The coolest thing about my Day of Service activity was that we got to see and talk to who we were helping. Once we were done cleaning the toys we could even give it directly to a child!” 11/12s student
tivities. Threaded throughout each discussion are thoughtful reminders and words of encouragement.

The energy upon returning to the fourth floor once students complete their activities is always joyful and electric: rosy cheeks and tales from the day—about playing with the little kids, or perhaps getting stuck in the elevator. These stories last for days afterward and become a lasting memory of the school year. We ask all students in the Upper School to reflect on the experience in writing for that evening’s homework. The prompts differ by grade level, but the exercise provides students and teachers a springboard for continued dialogue about community service in their lives and in our school community.

The Day of Service has become a tradition after only three years. A student in the 13s this year proudly stated, “I’ve made lunches for St. John the Divine soup kitchen for two years in a row. Can I be in that group again?” The students own this day and often look for ways to continue their work beyond it. Several students returned to Bloomingdale Head Start this year and worked with students for several hours each week in the classrooms. They are overjoyed to share their experiences, and their growth is evident in how they carry themselves and make time in their busy schedules to do even more.

Historically, community service has been an important component of the mission of our institution and the curriculum of the School for Children. Over the years, students have initiated and developed projects such as starting a school in Cambodia, getting used baseball equipment to school kids in Haiti, raising money for seeing eye dogs, and sending dolls to orphanages in China. Teachers help facilitate projects as
they emerge from students’ personal experiences. We are proud to be a part of the tradition of community service at Bank Street.

The Day of Service is an ideal component of constructivist education and fits in well with our mission statement and credo. Early on, students examine communities and the role of the individual within a community. From the 6/7s market to the Upper School Science Expo, students investigate the world around them and use this knowledge to make meaning and solve problems. Community service helps students to think about the world in different ways. They step out into the community, supported by organizations, families, and teachers. And by helping others, they learn about themselves.