

Service learning at Notre Dame Prep aids refugees

Every Thursday afternoon, a bus leaves the campus of Notre Dame Preparatory School (NDP) in Towson for Moravia Park Elementary School in northeast Baltimore.

The latter's offerings include the Refugee Youth Project (RYP), an after-school program which helps children whose families have fled other countries assimilate to the U.S.

The RYP's volunteer tutors include students from NDP, as part of its social service program, which immerses students in after-school, weekend and summer outreach.

"The social service program exists to connect students to the broader community surrounding NDP, specifically through the lens of transformation and justice," said Steven Pomplon, director of the school's social service program.

It involves service learning, which fuses volunteering and academics. While a growing trend at the university level, according to NDP, it is the first Catholic high school in the area to integrate a graduation service requirement into its academic curriculum.

"It's a growing necessity for any educational institution to meet students where they are," Pomplon said. "(Service learning) helps our students make connections with what they're learning in the classroom, and the lives that they're leading when they leave campus."

Two classes at NDP utilize service learning: 10th-grade social studies and advanced placement studio art, where senior Mary Tadeo is on the roster.

To explore the art class' topic of home and displacement, Tadeo and her classmates monitor current events and create their own pieces exploring various aspects of "home."

"The class is helping me prepare for my future," said Tadeo, who will pursue art in

college. “Not just being an artist, but making a difference with my art.”

Tadeo has been volunteering with RYP for three years, and assists in teaching an art therapy class there. With children from multiple countries and varying levels of English fluency, art serves as a universal language.

Art “is really a great way to get them to open up,” Tadeo said. “I’ve watched them become more open with their creativity.”

“They act just like any other kids,” said Ellie Heffernan, a senior at NDP who has been volunteering with the elementary-aged students since her sophomore year. “They love being listened to.”

Weekly, Heffernan and her NDP peers tutor at RYP, which offers English classes for children who hail from countries such as Eritrea, Syria, Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and the Republic of Sudan. Most have been in the U.S. less than three years.

“Except for the fact that they’re speaking a different language sometimes,” Heffernan said, “they are just the same as any other elementary school student.”

NDP volunteers help with homework and engage the students with games and books, quizzing the children on spelling, and asking them to draw pictures and point out items in picture books.

“Kids are kids, people are people,” said Pomplon. “You break down boundaries and any walls that divide us when you create relationships.”

Volunteering with RYP connects the NDP students to the history of their school. It was founded in 1873 by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who list unity as one of their main charisms.

“We’re interacting together as people,” Heffernan said, adding that NDP’s service hour requirements focus on creating relationships. “At the end of the day it’s not what you did, it’s who you did it with.”

“In the future,” Pomplon said, “our aim is to really integrate all of these great

experiences, these real-world experiences, into the classroom so that it is indistinguishable what is academics and what is service. It's just a vibrant educational experience for every student."

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