

Encouraging Community Service Work Among Refugee Youth

Meme Tran
Worcester Refugee Assistance Project
University of Massachusetts Medical School

Background

- The Worcester Refugee Assistance Project (WRAP) is a non-profit organization made up of volunteers who help local refugees from Burma adjust to their new homes in Worcester.
- Refugees from Burma represent various ethnic groups with different traditions and languages.
- In Worcester, there are around 35-45 young people aged 15-24 from Burma.
- Refugee youth from Burma feel a large sense of responsibility to succeed in the U.S. and to attend college to earn professional degrees to support their families.
- Meredith, a nurse practitioner at the Edward M. Kennedy Community Health, initiated the WRAP youth group in 2010 with funding from the Schweitzer Fellowship. At the time, it was named the Burma Youth Organization.
- Courtney Temple, a medical student from the University of Massachusetts Medical School, renamed the group as the WRAP Youth Group and continued the efforts of the Youth Group by first holding workshops to teach them about health and nutrition. She then exposed them to different activities such as watching local college sports' games together, as well as performing different activities such as ice skating or rock climbing.

Purpose

- To foster leadership skills in the youth so that they may one day become advocates and leaders in their own communities.
- To promote positive activities in the daily lives of youth so that they may make positive choices for their futures.
- To encourage teamwork among the youth group members so that they may work together to lead the Youth Group one day.

Projects

The Youth Group engaged in several projects throughout the community:

- World Refugee Day
- Asian Festival
- Worcester County Food Bank
- WRAP Summer Reading Program on Thursdays
- WRAP Children's Group on Saturdays
- Worcester Senior Center Garden
- Worcester Senior Center Inter-generational Program



Volunteers from the Youth Group performed a traditional Karen dance at World Refugee Day and at the annual Asian Festival.



Volunteers from the Youth Group help children ages 5 – 7 read during the summer reading program every Thursday.



Volunteers from the Youth Group helped to pack 1,800 lbs of food on their first day and 1,420 lbs on their second day.



Volunteers from the Youth Group are continuously maintaining the gardens at the Worcester Senior Center.

Youth Reflections

- "To me, doing the Community service means a lot to me- I'm proudly making my community better, cooperation with friends or people, getting my lazy butt to do something, little or a lot it's something that makes you feel good at the end of the day... That you did something for your community. Also the time I put in the works help me too. It help me gets my confidence of working with people or friends because as a leader you have to cooperate with your people." —Day Reh
- "It [community service] means to give out my time and to help others. It offers me a wonderful and great life experience. It makes me happy helping others because I just feel so helpful towards others. Doing community service is an opportunity for me to be active in a community." —Evlyn Wah
- "Community service means working with other people to create an amazing aspect and to get great results from the hard work. It makes me happy to be needed and to see people smile due to my hard work." —Thea
- "To me, doing community service means giving out my time to get involved and to take care of the people around me so I can make a difference in my community. Doing community service makes me feel happy and positive to help out others and by helping others around me, I gain more and more experience towards leadership." —Wahyu Htoo

Conclusions

The volunteers from the Youth Group have gone above and beyond by donating their time to their communities even when they have large responsibilities at home. Altogether, the youth volunteered over 167 hours this summer in various projects. In the future, we hope to hire youth group coordinators who can plan workshops to enrich the youth with different life skills so that they may one day become leaders in their communities.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Heather-Lyn Haley, PhD, for making this project possible and for her continuous support of the Worcester Refugee Assistance Project. I would also like to thank Meredith Walsh, NP, and Courtney Temple for allowing me the opportunity to work with the Youth Group. Thank you to all the WRAP board members for being supportive of my project. This project was made possible by the UMMS Summer Assistantship Program.