

Homelessness

Essential question: “How do people become homeless and what can we do to help?”

School: Thurgood Marshall Elementary School

Year of project: 2004-2005

Even after summer vacation, Kim Barth’s students retained strong impressions of their service-learning project on homelessness from the year before. “Roosevelt Darby [a formerly homeless man] told us that if you make \$5.15 [an hour] at a McDonald’s or day care center, you can’t afford a cell phone,” reflected one student. “A lot of kids were disappointed to hear that. They didn’t know that people have to pay for things . . . like their apartment or house, their mortgage, their bills, like gas, water electric.”

When they began their project, the students harbored many misconceptions. Their research helped them discover some of the underlying causes of homelessness and, at the same time, identify ways to offer immediate assistance.

They interviewed the residents of Stenton Family Manor, a transitional living facility for temporarily homeless families. They also met with the outreach coordinator of the Philadelphia Committee to End Homelessness and later visited the program’s day center.

The class began conducting service early in the year and continued to do so through June. They garnered donations from local businesses, churches and individuals for various agencies serving the homeless. For Thanksgiving, students collected and delivered food to Stenton Family Manor. They also collected toiletry items and created baskets of these much-needed supplies for residents of another family center.

When the tsunami left thousands of Southeast Asian families without homes in late December, Ms. Barth’s students held a Dollar Dance and donated the proceeds to the American Red Cross. They also engaged in advocacy, writing letters to their congressional representatives in support of the Bring America Home Act (HR 2897).

At the end of the school year, students conducted a drive to collect books, socks, and toothbrushes to stock the shelves of local homeless shelters. They also held a pretzel and water ice sale to purchase razors for homeless men, whom they

interviewed when they delivered the items to Philadelphia Committee to End Homelessness.

As a final group reflection and celebration, the class created a quilt representing the various aspects of the project for the school community to see.

These activities met real community needs while developing an ethic of service and community among the students. As one student put it, "I want to do service-learning because when I help people, I feel like I am helping myself."