

Fighting Poverty

Young adults make a difference through Met Council's AmeriCorps program

By ADENA STERN with
AMY LAU, RAIZY MUSHELL,
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Within the past nine months, we, the Met Council AmeriCorps team, have developed and supervised numerous unique volunteer

IN THE COMMUNITY

initiatives and successfully recruited and managed 6,397 volunteers. Our work has reached the greater New York City population, improving the lives of over 109,492 clients.

Despite our accomplishments, we are not veteran non-profit leaders, but rather five young adults committed to growing personally and professionally.

Through an AmeriCorps grant secured by Met Council and supported by the UJA-Federation of New York, we and nine other members were given the opportunity to create a meaningful difference in the lives of the less fortunate in our communities, and we jumped at the chance.

Our first AmeriCorps meeting

Work It Out! Met Council senior clients prove you're never too old to participate in a fitness class.

together was one of great excitement, nervousness and anticipation. With our stomachs churning and our specific roles yet undefined, it seemed quite ironic that we would be soon addressing our missions' mandate of hunger relief and career readiness. We had come from myriad backgrounds but held similar ideals, and realized that our teamwork, dedication and communication would determine whether we were going to be successful.

The Met Council AmeriCorps program focuses on redressing poverty in our local communities. These collaborative efforts strengthen each community's capacity to engage and utilize Jewish volunteers to address the societal issues facing poor and near poor families without relying on increased professional management.

Perhaps the best example of our

success and teamwork within the community can be seen through our first, large-scale initiative, Pack It Up for Purim. This was a food collection and nutrition awareness campaign, tied into the Purim custom of creating *mishloach manot* packages (traditionally made of sweets/candy and given to neighbors or friends).

Pack It Up for Purim mobilized volunteerism greatly within the Jewish community to benefit the population at large. Word of the initiative even reached the corners of government offices, with New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Councilmember James Gennaro helping to distribute packages to those in need. In total, Pack It Up for Purim partnered with over 40 individual agencies to provide over 3,600 healthy food packages and recipe cards to food distribution sites in the greater five boroughs, Westchester and Long Island.

As the creator and project coordinator for Pack It Up for Purim, the initiative certainly had a special meaning for Mark Rosenthal. "Any time you have the opportunity to see all of your hard work and commitment finally come to fruition is extremely rewarding. With Pack It



Photos courtesy UJA-Federation of New York

Up for Purim, it was an even greater sense of accomplishment as I knew the positive impact the initiative was having in the lives of others," said Rosenthal.

Through hard work and dedication, we not only organize and plan all of our programming, we also supervise and manage a staff of volunteers as well.

During our time with AmeriCorps, dedicated volunteers never ceased to amaze and inspire.

Last January, while preparing for a food and clothing distribution, Bridgette Adair, an AmeriCorps delegate at the Sid Jacobson Jewish Community Center, told the following story.

"Our group of volunteers began unloading carloads of coats for dis-

'The energy and enthusiasm I have seen by people in need helping other people in need is overwhelming.'

tribution when an unlikely man volunteered to help. He stuck around until the end of the day and then asked if we had a coat in his size. Without giving a second thought, this man volunteered his time while he was the one in need."

Adena Stern, working at F•E•G•S Health and Human Service System, had similar experiences throughout her AmeriCorps year.



An AmeriCorps member leads a career preparation course, a valuable resource in these difficult economic times.

need is overwhelming. I have seen the way in which giving people truly want to help one another throughout this year-long experience," said Stern.

Working at the Samuel Field Y, Raizy Mushell had the opportunity to witness many acts of goodwill throughout the year. "A client with an IT (information technology) background later came back to the Y asking to volunteer within his industry and help those in need who are currently in a similar situation to himself," recalls Mushell. "He was driven to give

family in need of food and personal care items from the new food pantry, which was established at the organization this year as a result of Pack it Up for Purim. By serving on the frontlines, she had the chance to speak directly to a client and provide immediate assistance to support the client's family during their most vulnerable moments. "I felt the need to take the extra step to help this family and other clients in need every way in order to reduce their burdens," said Lau.

At the beginning of the year, each program was created to be sustainable. We are excited to see each one grow, along with developing additional AmeriCorps programs. Through teamwork, dedication and communication, our collaborative efforts have helped to create sustainable programs and a tighter network of Jewish agencies.

With poverty still a stark reality in New York, we hope that other young adults choose the same path we have by joining AmeriCorps. Though our mission was to help those less fortunate, in the end, through our new skills, lessons learned and experiences shared, the people best served were ourselves.

For more information on Met Council's AmeriCorp program, visit www.metcouncil.org.

The writers are AmeriCorp delegates at different agencies in the metropolitan area: Adena Stern, F•E•G•S; Amy Lau, Suffolk Y JCC; Raizy Mushell, Samuel Field Y; Bridgette Adair, Sid Jacobson JCC; and Mark Rosenthal, UJA-Federation of New York.

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back to the community; fully understanding the impact of his work to enhance the life of someone else, yet he felt he in turn was the one who gained the most from the experience."

In another case, Amy Lau, at the Suffolk Y Jewish Community Center, had the opportunity to make a positive impact. She met with a

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