

Building stronger youth



Graduates of the Seymour Osman Community Center's Quantum Opportunities Program traveled to Mississippi in May for their graduation trip. Students and advisors helped with the ongoing clean-up of the area affected by last year's devastating hurricanes. According to the Dover center's Director of Family Services Thad Mandsager, the program stresses service as a life-long commitment.

By Alice Standish
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Since 1994, Seymour Osman Community Center (SOCC) has served as a home away from home for Dover youth.

Functioning as an extended family, the center staff provides a safe after-school haven where young people can get help with homework, learn the value of education, healthy lifestyles, relationships and community service, as well as bolster self-esteem, leadership skills and independence with forays into gardening, cooking, building, sports and world cultures.

"We provide a variety of experiences and hopefully point them in the right direction," said SOCC Director of Family Services Thad Mandsager. "Being here and providing support is very important."

One of the center's supports is the Quantum Opportunities Program, a drop-out prevention initiative that began three years ago with a group of randomly selected freshmen who took part in education, development and service activities, designed to support them staying in school and

enrolling in secondary education. Twenty students began the project, and 12 graduated from Dover High School in June.

Looking back, graduate Corey Nachampassak, 18, of Dover, remembers himself as a "slacker" who might have given up on school were it not for QOP. Today he has plans to attend New Hampshire Technical College in Stratham to "see what's out there."

"I was a slacker; well, a moderate slacker. It (QOP) helped with my grades and to mature a little bit, I guess," he said. "If it wasn't for this, I probably would have dropped out."

Corey's classmate, Chris Neslusan, 18, of Dover, is headed to the University of New Hampshire to study civil technology. He hopes to gain experience working in construction and someday operate his own company. He credits his experiences in QOP with helping him learn to communicate more easily and encourages youth to apply for the program.

"I like working with my hands so this was one of the possibilities," he said of his career choice; "but communication, that helps.

"If you're picked for this, I highly recommend it; it's rewarding."

Graduates -- inspired by a film about the plight of children in Uganda -- decided in May to make their graduation trip not to Cancun or Cabo San Lucas, but to Mississippi to help with the ongoing clean-up of the destruction caused by last year's devastating hurricanes.

"Along with education and relationships, service is one of three main components of QOP," Mandsager said. "We really push service as a lifelong commitment."

Students Teresa Chapman, Alex Goodwin, Nathan Marsolais, Mark Boud, Chris Neslusan and Corey Nachampassak made the trip to Waveland, Miss., funded by the Dover Housing Authority, Dover Police Department and Police Charities, Holy Rosary Credit Union, Martel Plumbing and the Eisenhower Foundation, and were accompanied by advisers Brandy Barshaw, youth development coordinator, Joe Caproni, Dover Police Department youth liaison, and QOP coordinator Liz Puchacz.

There they weathered bunkhouse living and muggy 108-degree heat to build and deliver storage pods for residents still living in FEMA- provided campers while trying to rebuild, and returned home amazed at the scope of the destruction and in awe of the courage and gratitude of the Waveland community.

"You think everything is going to be better; but there's still a lot of destruction," Corey said. "Steps to nowhere," added Nathan Marsolais, 18 of Dover, referring to homes that were leveled, leaving nothing but the cement steps that once led to a front door.

"You know, teenagers often get a bad rap. They're portrayed as selfish and wrapped up in their own interests," Mandsager said. "On this trip we saw them thinking and acting outside of their own interests, doing something really important. I'm certainly proud of them and what they've

accomplished, not only on the trip, but what they've accomplished in their three years in the program."

Back home, both students and advisers celebrated their accomplishments and those of their center family at an end-of-year banquet and talent show that included performances by the dance and drama clubs, a gymnastics act, an SOCC cheer written and performed by a third-grade student, and a juggling act by 5-year-old Stephen Brown.

Volunteers and center supporters also received accolades.

"We've really had dedicated volunteers working with us this year," said Mandsager.

Dover Rotary president Ken Muske accepted the center's "Champion of Children" award not only for underwriting the center's STAR (Science, Technology and Reading) summer program for kindergarten and first-grade students, but for its yearly school clothing program that allows youth to trade community service and homework hours for back to school shopping trips.

"We're more and more reaching out to the community trying to engage more volunteers," said Mandsager. "It's easy to develop a strong connection to the kids. To see them grow over the years is pretty powerful."

Seymour Osman Community Center welcomes volunteer support. Call Thad Mandsager, director of family services, at 749-6692 to discuss volunteer opportunities.