

12-17-2020

Gifts

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eCommons Citation

Spina, Eric F., "Gifts" (2020). *President's Blog: From the Heart*. 245.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/president_blog_spina/245

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Gifts : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Thursday December 17, 2020

Gifts

By Eric F. Spina

When I opened Dr. Kim Bigelow's email, I felt as though I unwrapped an early Christmas gift. It brought me that much joy.

As someone who interacts with a lot of students, I have heard and seen directly that Dr. Bigelow is an outstanding mentor to graduate and undergraduate students in research and class projects. In particular, I know that she supports students who do real-world projects that change people's lives. She recently wrote to tell me and a few others about a graduating senior who may just change the world.

Joe Vicario, who will earn a bachelor's degree in mechanical and aerospace engineering at the virtual December commencement ceremony, worked with a team of fellow students in a senior design class to develop a wheelchair-accessible, battery-operated large door that can safely keep individuals with intellectual disabilities from leaving the adult day service area at United Rehabilitation Services (URS) of Dayton.

Dr. Bigelow, the faculty sponsor and mentor for the project, called it “a nearly impossible task,” given the shortened on-campus semester and requirements for electronics, safety, and fire code regulations. Plus last spring’s design class abruptly halted the project when they ended up finishing the semester remotely. In all honesty, the project looked overly ambitious and too challenging for an undergrad class.

During a Zoom meeting to restart the project this fall, “Joe was the one saying ‘we will do this’ with an energy and a plan of action that I have seen from very few students,” Dr. Bigelow wrote, explaining that the team started from scratch on a new design.

It wasn’t an easy road. In early November, Joe isolated for 10 days in a residence hall room in a dedicated wing of Marianist Hall after being diagnosed with COVID-19, yet he continued to work on the design, counting on his teammates to build and assemble the door. With Thanksgiving quickly approaching and the clock ticking, the team took the assembled door to URS to install it, “but as happens with all great engineering plans, they ran into a few unexpected issues,” Dr. Bigelow said. Joe spent the night researching and figuring out how to correct an electrical component problem to ensure the door would operate as designed.

At the 11th hour, just hours before students left campus to finish the semester remotely, Joe worked solo at URS to correct the door’s malfunctioning switch after one of his teammates unexpectedly couldn’t help, and the other two had class.

“As soon as I got it to work, I actually screamed for joy,” he said.

Joe called the door “his graduation project,” his professor said, “but I’ll call it his gift to the community. A door may seem trivial, but to work as it does, to allow those in wheelchairs to access the room independently, while helping those in need of reminders and cuing to stay safely inside (giving caregivers peace of mind), is truly life-changing.”

That brings me full circle to a gift, only this gift Joe received from generous benefactors when the *Joseph Militello Memorial Scholarship* made it possible for him to attend UD. “With great humility,” he said on the eve of his graduation, “I would not be in this position without the generosity of our donors and the University’s dedicated faculty and staff. My four and a half years here have been such a blessing, from educating me to become an impactful engineer, to instilling values from our Marianist charism and Catholic faith.”

When Dr. Bigelow spotted Joe in a video thanking UD’s scholarship donors on National Philanthropy Day, she emailed me his story. “It’s not just students saying thank you, but the faculty who are so very thankful these students are on campus, too,” she wrote.

That’s a gift I’ll always treasure.