A Decade of Service

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A Decade of Service

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When a longtime university president retires, some schools put his or her name on a building. When Brother Ray Fitz, S.M., retired in 2002, the University of Dayton launched a center to continue the deep civic engagement that marked his more than two decades of service.

Celebrating its 10th anniversary, the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community is redefining the relationship between universities and their communities. The center specializes in building and sustaining partnerships with the community in work that has included Dayton Public Schools, after-school education programs, nonprofits, local government, neighborhood leaders, businesses and cities and associations in the Great Miami River watershed.

"We wanted an integrated way of serving the Dayton community and the larger region, and also to educate leaders who build community," Fitz said. "The students have exceeded our expectations and have seized the opportunity to lead and innovate to engage our community partners."

The Fitz Center began as an outgrowth of the special emphasis on the local community by Fitz, who now serves as the University’s Father Ferree Professor of Social Justice. As president, Fitz was personally involved in the Dayton region and supported University programs focused on community and family development. The Fitz Center rolled those programs into one to focus on community building and developing students as community leaders.

"A lot of programs get students engaged to help them learn about a discipline or gain real-world experience, but we believe that even if a student learns something, it's not a successful project unless they leave something, something that lasts and has an impact," said Fitz Center Executive Director Dick Ferguson.

(View the Related Story for more information on Fitz Center initiatives)

Dayton City Commissioner Nan Whaley, a 1998 University of Dayton graduate, said the Fitz Center has played a part in both small changes and fundamental ones in the region.

For example, she said, without the Fitz Center, officials from cities in five different counties would not be meeting regularly to talk about how to leverage the Great Miami River corridor. The center also helps students get out of the University of Dayton "bubble" and into the city, teaching them to appreciate and recognize complexities of urban issues.

"In the city and among our neighborhoods, the Fitz Center is well known," Whaley said. "Even though they are quiet and don't toot their own horn, they are known because of their work. It speaks for itself."

"The Fitz Center embodies servant leadership, which is part of the Marianist tradition. This is part of the huge imprint Brother Ray Fitz has left on this community."

Ferguson said the initial vision for the Fitz Center was more like a think tank than the active, engaged program it is today, with five student initiatives engaging 140 students in the local community regularly and involving hundreds of others on special projects.

"We quickly realized students could learn a lot and help lead in the community, but we had to have students who were around long enough to get to know the community and be committed to leading for a period of time," Ferguson said.

Fitz Center students come from a variety of majors and backgrounds; most of them discover something about themselves and the city that leads them to stay in the region and become leaders in their communities.

Senior business major Alex Galluzzo joined the Fitz Center his sophomore year as a River Steward. He said he had every intention of earning his degree and returning home to the St. Louis suburbs, but all of that changed after discovering Dayton.

"Even though I grew up right outside of St. Louis, I never felt like I had a great connection to the city," he said. "But all I've learned
about Dayton and the assets of this region, it's given me a longing to be that connected to wherever I'm living. The connection to the city of Dayton is so strong I can't imagine leaving."

Galluzzo will return to the University in the fall as a graduate assistant for the Fitz Center's Rivers Institute as he pursues an MBA. His primary responsibilities will be creating educational outreach about the Great Miami River, yet another surprising result of his Fitz Center experience.

"I'm a business major, but I've worked so much in schools and after-school programs. It boggles my mind because I find I'm focused on community outreach and education rather than just supply chain and operations management," he said.

Each year, a new cohort of students is recruited for each of the five leadership programs: Neighborhood School Centers interns, Dayton Civic Scholars, Semester of Service, Rivers Institute and Graduate Community Fellows. They learn from the older students, faculty advisers and community partners. And they meet regularly to discuss what they are learning and to plan projects.

"Dick Ferguson has done an amazing, innovative, thoughtful job with all the center's programs," said Bro. Ray Fitz. "He knows how to empower students. These students will over the years become faith-filled leaders who want to make a difference."

The Neighborhood School Centers program includes partnerships with local nonprofits. The East End Community Center, serving the Twin Towers neighborhood and Ruskin PK-8 students, has enjoyed an "unparalleled partnership" with the Fitz Center, said Leah Werner, who was director of housing and community development at East End for nine years.

"Fitz Center students help East End with tutoring, neighborhood cleanups, workforce development programs for adults, energy efficiency and mentoring the kids," Werner said. "The Fitz Center is really the open door to access the rest of the University of Dayton for fruitful partnerships and work to create a better community," Werner said.

This unique approach to civic engagement has garnered national attention for the Fitz Center. In 2009, the University tied for No. 2 nationally and ranked No. 1 among Catholic universities in the "Saviors of Our Cities" ranking. The ranking honors academic institutions for their positive impact on their urban communities and has described the University as "perhaps the most innovative of all engaged colleges and universities," singling out the Fitz Center as a creative partner in the community.

And for the last three years, the University of Dayton was named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, the highest federal recognition a college or university can receive for its commitment to volunteering, service-learning and civic engagement. Nearly 90 percent of University of Dayton students engaged in community service in the 2009-10 academic year, totaling more than 135,000 hours of community service.

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