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Semester of Service

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Brandon Towns didn't do a lot of community service growing up.

"Instead, a lot of community service was done for me," Towns said. "I remember as a kid going to food pantries or clothing storages for free clothes. But when I got to Dayton, I suddenly found myself on the other side."

Towns, a Columbus native entering his senior year at the University of Dayton as a biology major and religious studies minor, is the second of four children born to young parents who started raising a family on welfare and slowly climbed out of poverty. Now, with all of his siblings either in college or college-bound, Towns is wrapping up a summer semester of service at the Salvation Army Booth House in Dayton, a shelter for men recovering from substance abuse and addictions.

He's one of 11 students from a variety of majors participating in the University's Semester of Service program, operated by the University's Fitz Center for Leadership in Community. Now in its eighth year, the program allows students to take a semester away from full-time study to contribute 450 hours of direct service in the Dayton community. Students also participate in a three-credit course that meets once a week to examine urban issues and social justice. Six students are signed up for the fall semester of service starting next month.

The program embraces one of the tenets of the University's Catholic, Marianist identity, to learn and lead through service to others. The program is open to all majors but selects only 20 students each year. For 2010, a record-breaking 45 students submitted applications for the winter, summer and fall semesters.

"We're thrilled the program is taking root," said Joanne Troha, director of community service learning for the Fitz Center. "The word is out now, and Semester of Service is developing a reputation and a buzz. Students leave saying this is one of the best things they've done at the University."

And those students tell other students.

Like many applicants, Towns heard about the program through a friend who had just completed a semester of service. In his 10 weeks working with men at the Booth House — helping them with practical needs such as finding a job, managing money, finding housing and earning an education — Towns discovered the experience "is one of those things that can change a life."

He described his summer work as a humbling process that taught him the importance of commitment, professionalism and self-reflection. He also gained insight into two of his passions that sometimes seem at odds: science and religion.

"My faith has always been important to me, but it wasn't until I took a theology class last year that I understood how central grace, mercy and social justice are to Christianity – you can't really care about God without caring for God's people," he said. "And in my evolution classes, I learn how every aspect of life is dependent on another. At the Booth House, I've seen first-hand how this all comes together. I realize how interdependent the various parts of our lives are, and how interdependent society is, but I also have been able to love others, to help, to teach and to learn."

Students like Towns are not the only ones taking notice of Semester of Service. Local service agencies find the program a great opportunity for additional resources, to educate students and to raise awareness.

"The program has been great," said Maria Zerhuisen, programs coordinator at Miami Valley Literacy Council, which has participated in the program the last three summers. "We see an increase in those we serve during the summer, and the student provides an extra pair of hands. And for the student, we do our best to give them a well-rounded experience, immersing them in the culture of the people we work with."

The partnership between the program and Miami Valley Literacy Council has also paid off for student workers. Over the last two years, the Council has hired its summer Semester of Service students to work part-time as program assistants during the fall and winter semesters, Zerhusen said.
For Christine Olding, a senior English and philosophy major from Centerville, working at the literacy council this summer was more than a resume builder and potential job offer.

"I saw it as a way to give back to the community I grew up in, and the work I do helps me explore the degree I'm pursuing," she said.

The literacy council assists adults, children and the local English-as-a-second-language population with improving literacy and math skills. According to Zerhusen, 223,000 adults in the Miami Valley are functionally illiterate, reading at or below a fifth-grade reading level.

Olding tutors three clients one-on-one and co-teaches basic reading and math classes for adults. She admits she was surprised by how many people in the Dayton area lack the ability to read even the alphabet.

"I enjoy showing people how much reading can improve their lives, and how much fun it can be," she said. "And I've learned that giving back to the Dayton community isn't just about working for an hour or two or doing the obvious things. People shouldn't overlook even the smallest ways that they can help out their community."

Before participating in Semester of Service, Olding said she was undecided about her future, possibly considering law school. But after this summer, she plans to seek out at least a year of volunteer service with Literacy AmeriCorps.

Such a reaction is not unusual, Troha said. Semester of Service students rarely complete the program without a new perspective on life and their futures.

It happened to Towns. As a biology major, he isn't considering a career as a counselor or social worker, but he can no longer see himself working in a lab all day. His work with Semester of Service has inspired him to incorporate his experiences at the Booth House, his knowledge of biology and passion for faith to advocate for social justice through a career in criminal justice.

"Whatever your passion is, it can be used to create something beautiful," he said. "You may provide just the right spark or enough water to help a flower grow in a crack in the concrete."

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