

When neither service nor learning is a lost cause

By William C. Kashatus

Last year I spent the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday painting the walls of the Vare Recreation Center in Grays Ferry. A fellow teacher and a dozen of our students also were wielding paint brushes, clearing trash from the surrounding playground, and getting to know some of the teachers and students from Ben Franklin High School who joined us.

We were part of the Greater Philadelphia High School Partnership, a University of Pennsylvania-sponsored project in which students from city and suburbs do shared community service projects.

More than 500 students from 63 public, private and parochial schools in Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery Counties and the City of Philadelphia participated in a wide range of service projects, including AIDS awareness, feeding the homeless, park cleanups and drug prevention.

Some people might consider our work a lost cause. Cynics argue that the federal government's recent promotion of volunteerism is a tacit acknowledgment that private citizens and charities might be able to succeed where big government has failed. For those of us who have tried to integrate service into the curriculum in our schools — a concept known as service learning — the challenge seems, at times, insurmountable. Many teachers are unable, or sometimes unwilling, to grasp the relationship between what amounts to an experimental education and the cognitive skills they teach in their classroom.

Instead they view service as an "add-on" that can only detract from the time they have to teach "real" content and skills in their subjects. Even some of my own students, when asked to spend a Saturday morning at Vare, suggested that ours was a lost cause. "I'll give it a year," said one, "and I'll bet you that the place will be completely trashed. And then, what will you have achieved?"

Call me a champion of lost causes if you will, but I think my students and I achieved a lot last year.

Despite racial turmoil that Grays Ferry experienced, my students and I continued to volunteer at Vare throughout the spring. In the process, we came in contact with students and children from very different social and economic circumstances, some from the surrounding neighborhood. Whether we were playing a pickup basketball game or painting a staircase, we learned that we share many of the same interests.

"We all want the same things in life," wrote one of my students at the completion of the project. "We all want a safe place to play basketball, to take dance classes or simply to hang out with friends." At the same time, another student reminded me that "our weekly visits to Vare became a 'reality check,' allowing us to be grateful for the things that so many of us take for

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granted in our lives."

Today, a fellow teacher, my students and I are going to join others from Germantown, Cheltenham and Abington High Schools to rehab some rooms at the Germantown YWCA. It's another one of those projects that some may view as a lost cause. But for me, it's one of the most meaningful causes I can join as a teacher of young people.

At a time when funding uncertainties threaten to widen social disparities in our schools, the Greater Philadelphia High School Partnership is making an earnest attempt to bridge the gap. It's an effort to pay witness to the example of Dr. King, who dreamed that one day "all of God's children, black and white, Jews, Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics can join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

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