

Think Links – Caring Connections

By Sue Walls

One of my most memorable service- learning experiences took place during the Christmas season of 2000. It was conducted by the Student Government Association (SGA) and involved participation of the entire student body and staff of Stephen Decatur Middle School.

Meet a recognized community need: The students first approached our principal about conducting the "Think Links - Caring Connections" ("Links") service-learning activity after seeing ads in the local newspaper requesting people and organizations to donate toys for the U.S. Marines Toys for Tots Program. We thought for sure that the school could raise enough money to purchase at least \$500 worth of toys.

Achieve curricular objectives: Our project fulfilled Maryland Content Standards in the areas of persuasive writing and speaking, effective communication, and math computations. Additionally, one of our school's missions is to prepare our students to become productive and responsible citizens. What better way to prepare them than through this real life event? Reflect through the service-learning experience: Throughout the project and at its end, students reflected on the need of the children they would be helping. They felt good knowing that children whose parents could not afford toys would still have a visit from Santa. Pictures taken during the event and during the final delivery of the toys produced a pictorial reflection of a successful project.

Plan ahead for service-learning: A committee of students was organized and the students spent many after and during school hours preparing for the two weeklong event. Students cut four different colors of paper into ten inch long strips (links) - one color for each teaching team, developed a written description of our plan and our objectives to be given to all homeroom classes and teachers, and planned the publicity (posters and announcements) to promote the project. Our plan was to raise awareness for those less fortunate and encourage students to help make their lives a little brighter during the holiday season.

Develop student responsibility: During the action phase of the project, students sold the links for 25 cents during homeroom and lunchtime. It was their responsibility to "talk up the project" and encourage students to donate money. Even though the money was for a good cause, students were hesitant about paying money for a "piece of paper". However, we had a strategy planned which increased sales. First of all, we stapled and hung the links into chains and hung them from the ceiling in the main halls so that the teams could compete against each other. This provided the students with a visual idea of how much each team had contributed. It was exciting to see the students enter school each day and look at the chains to see which team had the longest chain and therefore had contributed the most. Then, each day during the morning announcements, students were reminded of the purpose and told the amount of money raised. Seeing the chains generated much dialogue and students enjoyed hearing how much money had been raised each day. As you can imagine, many hours of the students' time was taken up stapling and hanging the links. Several students stayed after school on different days to do this. You wouldn't think that this would be something fun that teenaged students wanted to do, but the team competition aspect created enthusiasm and the spirit of giving was contagious.

At the end of the two weeks, our students and staff had donated more than \$1400 to be used to buy toys for less fortunate children during the holiday season. A group of students went to local stores and purchased toys for all age groups. Another group of students contacted the U.S. Marines and arranged a day for them to come to the school to pick up the toys. Still another group of students packed the toys and helped the marines load them onto the truck.

Establish community partnerships: The first year that we conducted "Links", all of the toys were donated to the U.S. Marine Corps Toys for Tots Program. However, this service-learning project has evolved into an annual event where toys are now donated to the Worcester County Santa House sponsored by the Worcester County Sheriff's Office and the Toys for Tots Program conducted by the Marine Corps. The students at Stephen Decatur Middle School now also adopt a family through the Worcester County GOLD (Giving Other Lives Dignity) Program and use "Link" money to purchase Christmas presents requested by the family.

Equip students with knowledge and skills needed for service: The students involved directly in this project learned the organizational skills of how to plan a project and carry it out from its inception to its conclusion. They also developed leadership skills. Students and staff who participated in the project by donating their money learned the invaluable lesson of selflessness and awareness that it was good to help those who were less fortunate.