

Building Bridges for Hmong Youth

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In 1994, a group of UW-Eau Claire students, in collaboration with the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Inc. (ECAHMAA), started a program known as Building Bridges. This program offers Hmong youth the opportunity of meeting and working with a mentor—typically a university student—on their school work. It also offers Hmong youth the opportunity to interact with someone outside their culture, so they can get used to living in a dual culture society. But the program doesn't run itself; it is run by two student interns, one of them being One Yang.

One started volunteering at the association to fulfill his service-learning hours, but he is now one of the lead interns of the program as the Association Coordinator. One finds kids who need extra help with their school work and recruits volunteers from the university to act as mentors. He does this by posting volunteer opportunities on the Service-Learning webpage, attending the Community Action Fair and presenting to classes on campus. One said, "Our program is basically mentoring and tutoring. We meet every Wednesday at the Hmong Association with the first hour focused on the mentors helping the kids with their homework and the second hour is usually an activity."

Besides the mentoring sessions, One said Building Bridges likes to incorporate fun events. "I really wanted to incorporate more of the Hmong culture, so the university students could learn a few things too; because it's also their experience. Just a few weeks ago we had a culture night where we had a Hmong presenter—one of the staff at ECAHMAA—come in and talk about the Hmong culture. And we made egg rolls! We also have other activities such as pumpkin carving, which is an American tradition, but most of our kids are fairly new to the United States—like 4 to 5 years—so those traditions work to benefit the kids also."

As the interview went on I asked One to share more about his service-learning experience. He said, "Service-learning is really great because it not only requires students to go out and be active in the community, but it also makes them experience other things that they may or may not be doing in their future careers. It taught me that there's always something to learn, even if you think you already know it. I didn't think I would learn anything because I'm Hmong, but I learned a lot of things about myself and my culture that I didn't know before."

One also mentioned something that applies to both the volunteering and service-learning perspective. “It is what you make it. If you don’t talk with your mentee and get to know them and ask questions, then you probably won’t take a lot from the experience. But that’s how every experience is; if you embrace in it, then you’ll learn something, if you don’t, then you won’t.”

At the end of our interview I asked One to give a final take home message for students looking to fulfill their service-learning hours. “It’s not just a requirement; it’s something that prepares us for life later on in many ways. It involves us giving to our community, which in turn helps the community, so we should really embrace it. You have your school and you have your work, but you should definitely give back to the community too. *I think even if it weren’t a requirement to graduate, it’s still something that we students as the newer generation should do; because it’s our society and we have to improve it.*”

*Does this service-learning opportunity sound like something for you? Check out their website for more info! http://www.ecahmaa.org/services_and_programs/building_bridges_for_hmong_youth

*And don’t forget to visit the Service-Learning webpage to find projects posted by community partners or to start your own project!