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July 2

## MAINE COMPASS: School-based program teaches kids basics of philanthropy

Larry Sters

A young man I'll call Jack spent a couple of hours at Portland's Wayside Food Warehouse unloading cases of donated food, organizing freezer space and loading milk onto trucks for local soup kitchens.

He then asked a staff member if it would be OK to come back and volunteer again sometime. When he was told his help would be appreciated anytime, he said he had no telephone so he would just check in from time to time. He said Wayside had provided him with many meals, and he wanted to give back.

Jack hadn't been coaxed by his parents to understand the food chain of the less fortunate through volunteering; he is not a Boy Scout earning a community service badge or part of a local parish outreach program.

Jack is a homeless young man participating in Portland's Jobs for Maine's Graduates (JMG) program through the Youth Building Alternatives curriculum at LearningWorks, where teens can earn a General Educational Development diploma while learning job and life skills.

They also participate in Jumpstart Our Youth (JOY) -- the state's most comprehensive youth philanthropy program -- with Jobs for Maine's Graduates students statewide.

The JOY program was launched in 2008 by the Unity Foundation, which is based in Unity, with funding partners UniTel Inc. and the Maine Community Foundation. It involves 4,000 Jobs for Maine's Graduates students at schools throughout the state and its two youth development centers.

With money and guidance provided by the funding team, the JMG students learn about philanthropy as a means to better understand how communities function.

As grant makers, the students, guided by JMG teachers, are serious about the task of donating money. They solicit requests for proposals from community nonprofits, review agency budgets, ask for program results and demand to know how their contribution will make a difference in the lives of local youth and families.

Agency heads complete online applications, present their pitches to the students and respond to questions about how a grant will improve lives locally. The students vote, debate and advocate, and choose a worthy organization or organizations.

And then they give the money away.

National studies show that young people who volunteer and become involved in local community work tend to stay involved as adults.

Before long, this generation of Mainers will be running local nonprofits, serving on community and agency boards and working in municipal government.

JOY provides a background in solving problems at a local level. Students better understand causes and learn how to develop and fund the solutions. Importantly, they learn to ask if and how an approach is working.

Here's a look at where some JOY grant funds went this year:

- \* Pine Tree Hospice in Dover-Foxcroft received \$500 from incarcerated students at Mountain View Development Center and a hand-made storage cabinet they built.
- \* The Cookery Company in Farmington received \$300 from Mount Blue High School to fund "Now You're Cookin'", a healthy eating cooking contest that involves students in food selection and preparation.
- \* Heart-to-Heart Clothing Store in Baileyville received \$1,000 and 150 gently used hoodies donated by the students at Woodland Junior-Senior High School. The store provides clothing and necessities at reduced cost or free to local families in need.

Across Maine, students supported domestic violence support services, community gardens and recreation programs that support thousands of Maine families.

The JMG program at Washington Academy in East Machias presented a \$1,000 grant to the Washington County Children's Program. "One thing that stood out for me was how much work goes into making a community function -- how many services I've taken for granted," said Rebecca Gardner, the student president of the program.

After three years, the JOY program has awarded more than \$174,000 in local grants to hundreds of Maine nonprofits augmented with 275,000 volunteer service hours that many might consider more important than the money.

The Jobs for Maine Graduates program also has aligned elements of the process into its core curriculum competencies, including demonstrating time management, delivering presentations and exhibiting work ethics essential to success.

We don't need to administer a final exam to know these students have learned how to assess community needs and determine how grant money and volunteer time can improve the work done by organizations in hometowns across Maine.

As Jack walked away, Susan Violet, the executive director of Wayside Food Warehouse, said, "Many of these young people don't have much, but this is an opportunity to participate in something larger than themselves."

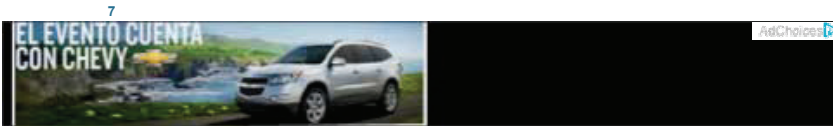
Larry Sters is chairman and CEO of the Unity Foundation, a public charity that provides management consulting and strategic capacity-building grant making to nonprofit organizations. He is also chairman of UniTek, a Maine based telecommunications company.

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