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Community volunteering is an option for area students' summer vacations

■ Children have many opportunities to help in their communities.

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A group of children from Zarrow International School including Danica Moore, 9 (left), Kate Potter, 10, and Barrett Carleton, 9, sing and dance while working on an assembly line packaging food while volunteering at the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma in Tulsa, Okla., taken on March 27th, 2015. For a story about. JAMES GIBBARD/Tulsa World

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By MICHAEL SMITH World Scene Writer | 0 comments

The school year is coming to a close soon enough, and you've already started planning the kids' calendars: summer camps, vacations and more.

But what about volunteer opportunities?

Perhaps they've given their time for a church function, or contributed canned goods or coats for a school drive, but what about during the summer, and maybe beyond?

Studies have shown that when young people volunteer, they are more likely to become involved in their community in other ways in the future, they are less likely to become involved in at-risk activities and they learn self-esteem, social responsibility and new skills.

Several area organizations encourage young people to volunteer, often in their teens, but sometimes even younger with their families.

"If you volunteer at a young age, you're going to volunteer at an older age, or at least that's been my experience," said Gretchen Hannefield, volunteer coordinator for the Tulsa City-County Library.

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Youth volunteer opportunities

Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma

Contact: 918-936-4545;
volunteer@okfoodbank.org

Note: Volunteers under age 16 require adult accompaniment and can assist with Product Recovery food repackaging in Family Night events. Teens can work in multiple areas, as well as apply to be Junior Ambassadors, who are high school students who host food and fund drives.

Saint Francis Health System

Contact: 918-494-1150;
saintfrancis.com/Pages/Volunteers/Student-Volunteers.aspx

Note: Student volunteers age 14 to 17 can apply in person at the Saint Francis Auxiliary office inside the hospital.

Tulsa City-County Library

Contact: 918-549-7491 for volunteer opportunities;
tulsalibrary.org/support/volunteer

Note: Teen Team volunteers, age 13-15, assist librarians. Applications are available at tulsalibrary.org/join-2015-teen-team; those 16 and older can serve the same volunteer options as adults. Applicants will be subject to a background check.

Emergency Infant Services

Contact: via email at kimberly@eistulsa.org, or by calling 918-582-2469;
emergencyinfantservices.org

Note: Volunteers for activities such as clothes-sorting can be as young as 6 when accompanied by an adult; teen opportunities include the Junior Board volunteers and the Young Philanthropists group.

Also: Volunteering options may also be found through organizations such as the Tulsa Area United Way and through websites such as volunteermatch.com.

Volunteerism for youths and families

Volunteer as a family

Today, families are finding new ways to spend time together, and volunteering is one way to do just that. Research has shown that volunteering as a family:

- Helps families learn about social issues and provides a new perspective on the world
- Provides positive role models and passes on

The library offers those 16 and older a variety of volunteer options, including taking an important role in the Summer Reading Program, which motivates young readers to keep those pages turning through the summer months.

But it also features a "Teen Team" for those ages 13 to 15 who love libraries, and many of these individuals may be volunteering for the first time.

"They are unique in the way that they can come in and they can see a lot of society's needs from that young age, like maybe what they have that others don't have," Hannefield said.

"Whether it's through the reading program or shelving books and assisting people, they can learn empathy, and how to be less judgmental, and different skills. I really believe that volunteering just makes you feel good."

She said she's surprised by how often these young volunteers make a comment along the lines of "I get a lot more out of this than your organization does," but Hannefield said the response is often "Thank goodness for our volunteers, because I don't know how we'd do it all without you."

At the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma last Friday evening, the hands of fourth-grade student volunteers from Zarrow International School sorted a variety of foods for a couple of hours during a Family Night function.

These students volunteered in the Product Recovery Room, where foods that have been donated in bulk are repackaged by the children into sizes that will be delivered to food bank clients.

As an example, you might picture fourth-graders tackling a giant supply of potatoes and repackaging them into 5-pound bags.

"They are high-energy workers, and they are wonderful, and I think they leave here with a different perspective," said Eileen Bradshaw, executive director of the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma.

"When they are out there sorting food, I think it drives home the point that some people

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family values to children

- Provides new learning experiences and development of new skills for both children and adults
- Provides quality time for the family to spend together
- Increases interpersonal communication and the problem-solving abilities of family members
- Helps youths decide what they want to do with their life

Why children should volunteer

Kids have fun when they volunteer, but volunteering also:

- Enhances development
- Promotes a healthy lifestyle and choices
- Teaches social responsibility
- Creates a lifelong ethic of service
- Improves the community

Courtesy the United Way (unitedway.org)

out there don't even have the most basic needs. If you get that started (with children) early, I think that is a benefit to our community and to the world."

These family-night events are ideal for young volunteers, as the food bank requires those under age 16 to be accompanied by an adult.

But even children as young as age 6 have helped out, such as drawing pictures for cards that are then sent to legislators along with food bank information and facts.

Or the little ones might water the foods growing in the garden or dig in the dirt a little, reinforcing the idea that this food is being grown for people in the community who most need nourishment.

"Volunteering really is one of the purest ways in which to pass on your values to your children," Bradshaw said.

Another organization that will accept children volunteering at a very young age, with adult supervision, is Emergency Infant Services.

It even has a Junior Board of teen directors, made up of high school sophomores, juniors and seniors who help to stage an annual EIS fundraiser.

It's not unusual to see young people volunteering at EIS, whether it be sorting clothes or packaging diapers that are desperately needed.

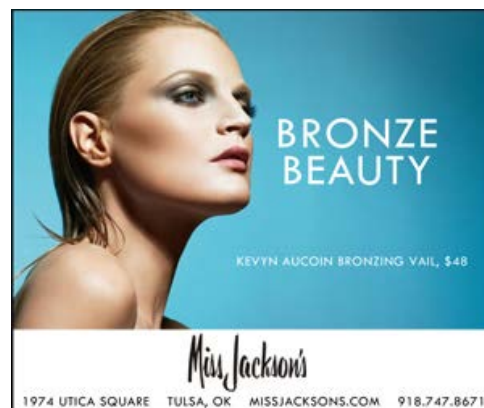
"Our organization is pretty much based on our volunteer help," said Tom Taylor, executive director of EIS Tulsa, who said he has fewer than 20 employees, "and we couldn't serve 17,000 people in our community without having 95 active volunteers, and with 21 on our Junior Board."

Sometimes the youngest volunteers, performing the most simple of tasks, can make some of the most moving impacts, said Rebecca Darrow, the director of volunteer services at Saint Francis Health System.

"It can be just a kind word or gesture, helping someone who's lost their way (getting around the hospital) and watching a young (volunteer) so gracefully walking them to where they need to be," Darrow said.

"Just as simple as that, and I can be in awe of what our young volunteers do every day."

Saint Francis has a summer teen program, for those ages 14 to 17, who have opportunities to interact with patients in the children's hospital's playrooms.



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Other opportunities, such as assisting family members or working at an information desk, also exist.

“Volunteering is such a good experience to learn something new,” Darrow said. “What I’ve learned is that there are a lot of kids out there who love to give back.”

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