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Tradition of Service Continues with Community Connections

Freshmen glean new experiences, reap new skills from day of service



August 24, 2015 | Melissa A. Patricio

BRISTOL, R.I. – For most of the freshmen who moved into the residence halls at Roger Williams over the weekend, college will be full of “firsts.” First time living away from home. First time choosing classes. First time... farming?

Some 1,100 volunteers from Roger Williams University infiltrated nearby cities and towns for the 11th Annual Community Connections day – the region’s largest single-day service program – on Monday, Aug. 24, partnering with 43 local nonprofits on projects that ranged from cleaning bird’s nest boxes to delivering donated furniture to families in need and, yes, harvesting vegetables.

For the 128 new students assigned to the Sharing the Harvest Community Farm at the South Dartmouth YMCA for Community Connections day, picking produce and clearing plant beds was admittedly a new experience. But the bright orange baskets used to collect the handpicked vegetables throughout the fields quickly became as ubiquitous as the iconic yellow t-shirts of the amateur agriculturalists carrying them. In just two hours, the students picked the entire backfield of tomatoes, weeded a field of pepper plants, ripped up 3,400 feet of black plastic weed barrier and harvested more than 4,000 pounds of squash, zucchini, eggplant, cucumbers and tomatoes for emergency hunger relief.

“All of the produce we harvest here is free – nothing is sold,” said Emma Rainwater, an AmeriCorps VISTA who has worked full time at Sharing the Harvest for the past two years. “For the people our food goes to, they would have to travel pretty far to get fresh produce. And we use no chemicals and no pesticides. Research is clear that having that kind of food in your diet is a major benefit.”

This was the first year that Sharing the Harvest called upon RWU for help, and in addition to being a new partner, it hosted the largest number of volunteers Community Connections has ever deployed to a single site.

“They have helped us catch up a whole lot,” Rainwater said, noting that the farm has never experienced this much help at this time of year in its nine-year history. “This group has provided 16,000 servings of fresh produce to neighbors in need via emergency relief organizations like United Way, the Red Cross and the Salvation Army.”

And while the students were already enthusiastic about the volume of produce they picked, their efforts took on new meaning when it was revealed where the food would go.

“It definitely makes the work feel a little easier and increases our motivation,” said Thomas Steriti, a freshman from Lynn, Mass.

It may not have been exactly how they expected to spend their first day together as official college students, but Steriti and his classmates agreed that it was an excellent opportunity to get to know one another and to learn about the University from their site leaders – upperclassmen volunteers who shared the Community Connections experience when they were first-year students. As they cleared the vines in the fields and washed the vegetables at the sorting station, the students chatted about their hometowns – as nearby as Warwick, R.I., and as far away as Quito, Ecuador – where they’ve traveled and, upon encountering a sizeable spider, what the bugs are like where they come from. They took selfies to share with friends back home and wondered what their parents would think of their newly acquired skill.

“My dad’s always asking me to pick the tomatoes at home, and I never do” one young woman commented to her group. “He’s going to be so excited when I tell him what I did today.”