AmeriCorps aids Rider community through service

By Dana Lynn Flatekval
Managing Editor

Imagine being able to give underprivileged children a chance to learn new things, play in a park or even go to an art museum. This is exactly what 23 Rider students have been able to do through the Rider Community Scholars in partnership with AmeriCorps.

AmeriCorps is a domestic peace corps which focuses on issues of poverty, hunger, urban development and education, according to member Melissa Borotto.

“Most people don’t know what AmeriCorps is about,” said Borotto. “I think it’s important to make them aware of the program and what we do for our community.”

Last year, members of AmeriCorps did over 3,000 hours of service and that was only with 11 members, according to Erin McGrath, Community Scholars program director. This year, the Corps hopes to beat that amount.

According to the AmeriCorps organization, over two million Americans of all ages and backgrounds engage in service each year.

It is important to the members that they are able to go out into the community and do service. “Plenty of organizations talk about helping, but not many go out and do the service,” said Borotto.

Members are able to pick from 300 or 450 hours per year plans, according to Borotto. Despite that fact that members do receive pay for their community service, they have irreplaceable bonds that they make with their communities that have nothing to do with money.

“For anyone who really wants to do this program, there must really be a desire,” said Borotto. “You should be dedicated to doing it everyday because everyone is dependent on you.”

Members can also receive educational awards, federal monies, that can be applied to tuition or graduate school.

Members can work at their choice of four different sites. The Trenton Afterschool Program (TASP), Homefront, the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK) and El Centro. Each AmeriCorps member works at one of these sites by participating and interacting with kids ranging from ages five-16.

TASP is a program that enables kids in the Trenton area to keep off the streets and socialize in a safe environment, according to Borotto. The program is located at Trinity Academy and provides a number of activities.

“Our job ranges from setting up snacks to reaching conflict resolution,” said Borotto. “We are making a connection to be a part of their lives.”

Lauren Petersack, a worker at the TASP site, said that community service has always been a huge part of her life.

“The biggest reward is their appreciation,” said Petersack. “The look on their faces is genuine and the hugs you get can’t help but make you happy.”

TASP might be the only opportunity for the kids to have enrichment in their lives, noted Borotto.

“They can gain culture and understanding of things they might not have otherwise,” said Borotto. “We help improve their lives through basic skills and activities.”

AmeriCorps member Maia Lopez reads books to kids from the Trenton After School Program.

El Centro specializes in working with children and adults through a Spanish resource center, according to Borotto.

“I worked there over the summer and during that time I faxed, typed, filled and even helped with the Youth Group program,” said Borotto.

According to Borotto, this is the only center for anger management in New Jersey for men of Spanish decent.

The number one thing for AmeriCorps members is dedication. People are depending on the skills and guidance of the members.

“Sometimes in order to fully be able to help your community you must be uncomfortable in a position,” said Borotto. “It’s different when you open your eyes and don’t turn your face away.”

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