

# FROM “ARM CHAIR” PHILANTHROPY TO HANDS ON SERVICE

Do you want to create a hands-on opportunity for your students to put their learning into action? Now that your students have identified an issue and non-profit organization they would like to impact through their philanthropy, here's how can you add a volunteer or service component to their Penny Harvest Work:

To help teachers, parents, students and coaches engage their students as volunteers we asked for advice from **Justine Zollo**, a 30 year veteran teacher who specialized in service learning projects and is now the Vice President of Volunteer Resources at The Gathering Place, Denver's only daytime drop-in center for women, children and transgender experiencing poverty and homelessness.

**Q** *What is the first step in creating a successful and meaningful service project that engages students?*

- A**
- It's all about creating a relationship and starts with conversation.
  - Match the gifts and interests of the students with the needs of the nonprofit and the community they serve.

## SERVICE PROJECT EXAMPLE

One year I had an exceptionally creative group of students who loved art. When I called **The Gathering Place** they told me about a new housing program for single women. Many of these newly housed women were starting their lives in their new apartment with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and a backpack of belongings. My students decided to make Welcome Baskets of new items to welcome a woman to her new home; some plates and silverware, cleaning products, towels etc. The students decided to paint and frame a “welcome home” picture to include in the basket. It was a beautiful project that met the tangible needs of a newly housed woman, and also celebrated her accomplishment of getting housed, making her apartment her home, and feeling love from the greater community.



**Q** *What should a teacher or coach be asking a nonprofit in that first conversation?*

- A**
- Does your organization welcome children as volunteers and in what capacity?
  - What are some ways young volunteers have successfully engaged with the organization and the community they serve?
  - Does your organization have resources or suggestions about how they might help your students understand the issues?
    - o Many nonprofits can't have children on-site for liability reasons or because the environment isn't appropriate for children. We have many young volunteers at The Gathering Place but we are very thoughtful about where and how they serve, and we make sure teachers are on-board as partners and supervisors when their students are on-site.
    - o Many nonprofits have speakers bureaus, literature to share, or can recommend books, websites or videos about the issues or population they serve. At The Gathering Place we created a youth service packet that includes FAQ's and ideas for youth service.
    - o Picture books about the issue, such as homelessness and poverty, are a great way to start a conversation with students.





**Q** *We have a group of students who are eager to help, and though liability doesn't seem to be an issue, the organization we want to partner with has turned our idea down. Why?*

**A** There are a variety of reasons an organization may not be able to work with some volunteer groups. It is important for volunteers to understand that an organization's first priority is meeting the needs of the population they serve, and making sure they are safe and respected. For example, although we want young people to understand issues of poverty and homelessness, 45 students touring our facility would be disruptive and undermine our clients' privacy and dignity.

**Q** *Can you give some examples of great service projects that you have seen between young volunteers and a non-profit?*

**A** SERVICE PROJECT EXAMPLES



At **The Gathering Place** we have a service relationship with a kindergarten classroom at The Logan School for Creative Learning and our Card Project. In the Card Project our clients create handmade greeting cards that generate income for the client artist. The children run a Card Project store at their school and sell our cards for a half an hour each week in the school lobby. Twice a month they come to our Card Project in groups of 4-6 to choose new cards, drop-off their money and visit with the Card Project artists. At school the students write about their card business for the school newsletter, make posters to hang in the hallways, track their sales with bar graphs and educate their school community about

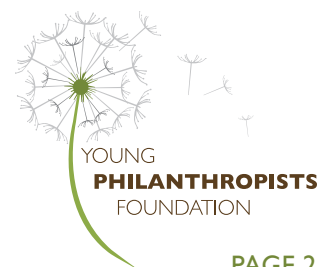
homelessness. Not only do our clients get extra income from the students' efforts, they also spend time with beautiful children and get to be teachers and grandparents. For many of our clients who are separated from family, this is a wonderful gift. And the students get to understand social issues through personal relationships and in an age appropriate way.

One year I had a classroom of students who were studying homes and habitats, so we reached out to **Habitat for Humanity**. Habitat was building a new home just a few blocks from our school. Our students were too young to be on the construction site so we had to find other ways to serve. Habitat sent a speaker to our classroom to help us learn about affordable housing and the work they do. We served by making lunches for the construction crews, tracked the progress of their work and created a beautiful quilt of children's drawings of hearts and houses that class parents helped us sew. The family receiving the house invited the children to the giving of the keys ceremony for the house, and we were able to present the quilt and wish the family well. The children not only gave the family a tangible gift, they also experienced their school neighborhood in a whole new way and themselves as forces for good in their neighborhood.



**Q** *Not all schools can visit on-site. Are there ways teachers and Penny Harvest coaches to create meaningful and engaging service projects at school?*

**A** Absolutely. The classroom is often the best place to put hands and hearts to work. That's what the Penny Harvest is all about. Penny Harvest classrooms have already researched the issues and inspired the entire school community, so it's an easy transition to mobilize all of that work into hands-on action. The first thing that comes to mind is a donation drive to meet a nonprofit's needs. Many teachers see donation drives as a surface way to volunteer and not very engaging, but a donation drive can be a rich learning experience.





## SERVICE PROJECT IDEA

We have a classroom who engages in year-long donation drives for our on-site food bank, **Betsy's Cupboard**, and the teacher has turned it into an amazing learning experience. The students and I start by talking about the needs of the cupboard and who uses its services. We talk about the kinds of food that homeless families need.



The students write speeches to give in every classroom and by asking for specific foods that meet the needs of the people we serve, they are teaching their peers about who is homeless in our community. Once a month a student leader calls our cupboard coordinator to ask about current and greatest needs, then sends out an "Action Alert" to their school community. These students see themselves as community organizers who teach and inspire their school community to give and learn. And the students also get to integrate other modes of learning into their work by weighing their donations, tracking their progress, just like they do in Penny Harvest.

**Q** *What if some of the organizations that Penny Harvest schools give to are out of the country or state?*

**A** Here are a couple of examples of service projects the kids did in school that had a big impact on the kids in other countries.

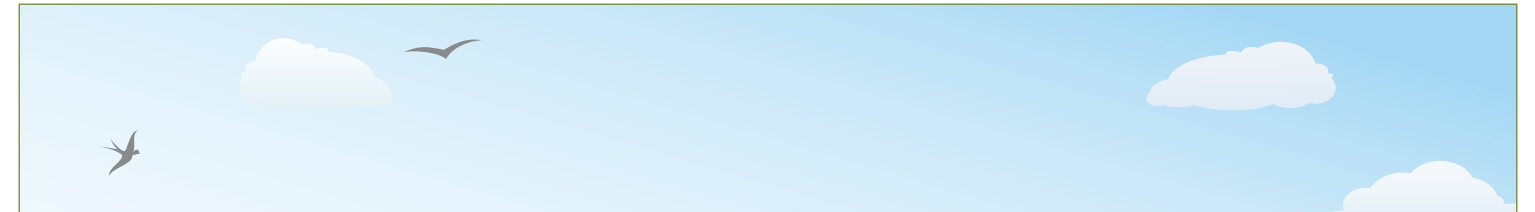
## SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

One year, my students did a project for **NAMLO International**, which builds schools in Nepal and Nicaragua. After speaking with the organization about their needs, our students decided to make teaching totes for the class. The students raised money and then filled strong canvas bags with materials for different subjects – the Math bag included flash cards and manipulatives, and the kids created a board game to teach math skills. They interviewed their elementary teachers and students to see what they liked about math, and put together worksheets and activities in a binder for the teachers abroad. For the English tote, kids went on a 'safari' to the kindergarten class to watch how they learn. They filled their tote with books, made costumes to go with the stories and recorded themselves reading the books.



In another project for the same organization, the kindergarten class created an alphabet book, but not just any alphabet book. First they researched a wide variety of alphabet books to see what styles they liked the best. Then they interviewed a teacher from a sister school in Nepal to find out what kinds of things the students in Nepal were interested in. The students took a field trip to a Nepalese store on Colfax to see what else their book should include, like I for Incense. They illustrated their book with pictures and photos, including photos of the kids in the class hugging, for H, so the Nepalese students could see their American friends. The class found a Nepali family to translate the introduction page and letter from the class into Nepali as well as English. And they raised money to send to Nepal so the kids at their sister school could make their own books. The project was a huge success on both sides of the world.





**C** Finally, can you give a quick brainstorm list of what kinds of projects meet your nonprofits needs that students can lend their hands and hearts to?

**A** Sure. But my hope is that teachers and Penny Harvest coaches can translate these ideas into projects that meet the needs of the nonprofit they are supporting.

### SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

At **The Gathering Place** our clients not only need “things”, they also need community and joy:

- Your school choir can come sing on site,
- A Valentine’s Day (or any other holiday) celebration in a box, with love notes written by the children and art supplies so our children can make their own valentines,
- A birthday bag with cake mix and party supplies so our moms can celebrate their child’s birthday,
- Handmade blankets our children can bring to an overnight shelter,
- A student’s favorite book with a handmade bookmark our moms can read to their children at bedtime in the shelter.
- Or a drive for unused zoo or museum passes and a child-created guidebook or coloring book and crayons that our children can take with them on their adventure.

Essential needs:

- Food for our cupboard
- Toiletry bags made of plastic zip lock bags containing shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste and tooth brush etc.
- New socks and underwear
- A school recently did a coat drive and in each coat pocket the student placed a letter wishing the recipient a warm winter and telling them about a wonderful memory they had while wearing that coat. What a lovely way to make a connection!
- Our Family Area always appreciates drives for baby toiletries to put into layettes for new moms.

Schools could also:

- Sponsor a meal (shop, cook and serve on-site),
- Make sack lunches for our clients who work or need to leave for appointments, and decorate the lunch bags,
- Start a Card Project store or host a card sales event.

We could brainstorm for days! But what’s really important is for teachers and coaches to talk to their nonprofit, ask good questions, and allow their students to give their best gifts. I think the students always come up with best ideas once they understand the needs and feel it in their hearts.

*Thank you Justine. I hope our Teachers, Coaches, Parents and Students are able to get some great ideas for their own service projects and some tips on how to establish that connection with an organization.*

