



INTERFAITH
ACTION OF GREATER
SAINT PAUL

Opportunity Saint Paul: Building Strong Volunteer Relationships

“It’s not just a one-way street in building relationships. And for authenticity to take hold, we want curiosity from both the student and the tutor.”

—Brooke Hanson Rivers, Reading Partners

Opportunity Saint Paul (OSP) is part of Interfaith Action's overall effort to relieve the effects of poverty and address its root causes, particularly in the Saint Paul area. By supporting non-profits partners that build educational and employment capacities, OSP volunteers become front-line workers in the effort to reduce poverty in our community.

Volunteer Impact

OSP volunteers are assigned to a wide variety of east metro non-profits, where they directly support the mission-driven work of those organizations. Volunteering is a critical way to effect social change in underserved communities—even with a minimal time commitment. Interfaith Action collaborates with organizational partners whose work seeks to alleviate poverty by placing people on pathways to economic opportunity. Such partners include Daily Work, which guides and mentors job seekers by helping them to prepare for, find, and maintain work that enables them to sustain themselves and their families. Substantive employment strengthens the social fabric of the entire community.

“According to Wilder [Foundation] Research, only two percent of Saint Paul residents with full-time year-round jobs live below the poverty line, versus twenty-five percent of people with part-time jobs, and thirty-nine percent of people with no job at all.”

—Julie Hoff, Daily Work

OSP volunteers train Daily Work’s clients on job searches, resume writing, interviewing, and many other employment-related skills. By relying on volunteer labor, Daily Work is able to geometrically expand the kind of hands-on mentoring that changes real lives.

“At Daily Work, the aggregate of contributions by volunteers is in excess of \$175,000 a year. That’s the value of your time.”

—Julie Hoff, Daily Work

Building authentic relationships

Successful volunteer experiences rely on building effective, authentic relationships between volunteers and clients. The end goal of all of OSP's non-profit partners is to transfer knowledge and skills—a goal that cannot be accomplished without the critical element of personal trust. One of OSP's ongoing collaborators is Reading Partners, an organization that pairs schools with volunteer tutors to help build confidence and skills in students who are behind grade-level in reading. Brooke Hanson Rivers and Xander Gershberg from Reading Partners work with scores of volunteers, and routinely provide trainings on how to develop authentic relationships between volunteers and the children with whom they work.

"You can't build a relationship if you just talk about equations, or just talk about phonics or books. You have to build a relationship by finding out what are their interests? What do they like in school? What do they like in their personal lives? And by finding this out, they'll start to engage with you."

—Xander Gershberg

Brooke and Xander presented some of their relationship-building tips to OSP volunteers at this learning community event and took questions from an audience of volunteers—many of whom work with children. In the course of the discussion, some audience members noted that certain students had resisted inquiries about personal hobbies or interests and asked how to deal with that kind of resistance, since it foreclosed the kinds of casual conversations that could lead to relationship building. Xander's advice was to let the students lead in such circumstances, and to clarify what areas they would like to talk about, giving them a say over the matter and engendering trust.

Interfaith Dialogue

The urge to volunteer often stems from a deeper desire—a desire to improve the world through acts that demonstrate love and care for one's fellow community members. Such motivations underpin major world faith traditions, including Christianity. In the gospel of John, as in all the gospels of the New Testament, the teachings of Jesus are recounted, and his words are reproduced. In John chapter 15, Jesus talks at length about his commandment to his disciples to "love one another," and his desire to view those who keep that commandment as friends. Professor Deanna Thompson addressed the concept of service as friendship in her comments to OSP volunteers.

"And Jesus says in that passage, 'I call you no longer servants, but friends.' For a long time, I've been interested in this shift from the language of service to being a friend."

—Professor Deanna Thompson, Hamline University