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Together

How a Class Project Became Much More

by Katie Linek

Located on a mountainside in New York State with beautiful views of the Hudson River, the United States Military Academy, also known as West Point, is a four-year federal academy for undergraduate studies and military training. Students there, known as cadets, receive a free, world-class education, which focuses on the development of leadership skills in the academic, military, and physical arenas. Upon graduation, the cadets are commissioned as second lieutenants in the Army.

More than 60 miles to the south in the New York City borough of Queens, just on the outskirts of the John F. Kennedy International Airport, is the Saratoga Family Inn, a Community Residential Resource Center (CRRC) serving 255 families with approximately 375 children. CRRCs combine the basic services of a traditional homeless shelter with programs for families living in both the shelter and the surrounding community.

Although these settings and their residents may appear worlds apart, one class assignment changed the lives and perspectives of all involved.

It Began with a Class

The Academy is very selective; less than one in 14 applicants is admitted each year. Candidates must be between 17 and 23 years old, have above average high school and/or previous college grades, perform strongly on standardized testing, provide written essays and letters of recommendation, receive a nomination (usually from a member of Congress), submit to a formal interview, and undergo a Candidate Fitness Assessment and a complete physical exam.

Cadet Zachary Cohen was the liaison between the cadets and Homes for the Homeless. He found and researched the organization, helped with the planning, and attended each event.



While youth from the Saratoga Family Inn left their day at West Point feeling inspired, the cadets were grateful to spend the day making an impact on young lives.

“The top 30-40 cadets at West Point go through a two semester sequence the second semester their junior year and first semester their senior year,” says Major Benjamin Summers, an instructor at West Point, explaining the United States Military Academy Graduate Scholarship Program that he and another instructor run. The program is an intensive mentorship program that prepares cadets to compete for graduate scholarships. The most recent course the cadets took, Critical Thought, helps the cadets become better leaders, officers, scholars, and citizens. “Their focus this semester was inward and understanding more about themselves, and then also understanding how to look at the world in a more nuanced way. They learned how to look at issues through a critical thinking lens,” explains Summers.

In the class, students were divided into “leadership development groups.” Cadets Zachary Cohen, Chong (CJ) Na, Shelby Lindsay, Nathanael Thomas, and Araceli Sandoval formed one such group.

“On our first day of class we were told, ‘I do not care what you do or how you do it— give back to the community in some way and tell me how it goes on the last day of class,’” describes Cohen, one of the cadets. “That was the assignment. It was opened with nothing else to it—no other instructions. We have never really done anything like it before and we were excited to get started.”

“Service to the community helps instill a little dose of humility and appreciation for what others are doing for their communities and what others are doing that falls into the category of service,” proposes Summers. “It forms connections and helps share perspectives that are meaningful for both parties.”

“The skills that our group possesses are people skills,” Lindsay, another cadet, suggests. “We all really enjoy working with children, so we tried to focus our efforts on something along those lines.”

Filling a Need

Each summer, Homes for the Homeless (HFH) Summer Camps sends more than 500 homeless and formerly homeless children from New York City to sleepaway camp in the woods of Harriman State Park. Most have grown up in the city and have not spent much time in the wilderness. Attending camp offers them the opportunity to have fun, make new

friends, and learn new skills like swimming—all away from the stresses of everyday life. HFH Summer Camps is run by Homes for the Homeless, the non-profit organization that operates the Saratoga Family Inn.

“When you go up to the camps while in session and see the kids in action and how rewarding it is ... these kids really take a lot away from it,” says Cara Pace, vice president for planning and operations at Homes for the Homeless.

The camps are only in session during the summer months, therefore every spring HFH seeks out volunteers to assist in an exhaustive cleanup of the debris that gathered during the winter months. “It is brutal, hard, hot work with bugs,” says Pace. “It involves clearing out the leaves and picking up the ‘winter’ from the campsites.” In her search for dedicated volunteers, Pace contacted the volunteer coordinator at West Point.

At around the same time, the cadets were looking for an opportunity to help the community. “I was asking about opportunities in New York City and asking about different organizations that might be looking for help. Someone referred me to Cara,” tells Cohen. Lindsay adds, “We asked Cara, ‘What can we do? How can we make an impact?’”

‘A Day in the Life’

One Saturday in April, a group of 13 kids from the Saratoga Family Inn travelled with their chaperones up the Hudson River to West Point to experience a day in the life of a West Point cadet. The day began at the lowest part of the campus for a hike up the mountainside. Cadets Cohen and Na led and got to know the group. “The kids saw West Point and they spoke to CJ (Cadet Na) and Zach about what it takes to get there,” recounts Roy Anderson, director of recreation at the Saratoga. “The cadets were articulate when explaining they have to do well in school.”

For lunch, the group ate in the cadets’ mess hall—a site not accessible to the public. “They learned what a plebe is (a first year cadet) and what they go through—how they have to sit at the table, how they should not waste food, how to properly use their utensils, what is the appropriate tone of voice to use at the table,” recalls Pace when discussing the experience.

After lunch, the group was in for a special treat. “I have some friends on the football team and I asked them, ‘What are you guys doing? Will you come play football with some kids?’ And they were all about it,” says Lindsay. “I had asked three people and it turns out that there were over ten of them there.”

“We met quite a few football players,” says Anderson. “There were so many football players that actually turned up on their own to meet the kids that they had a pickup football game.”

The kids had the experience of a lifetime, playing football with a group of Army Black Knights (West Point’s football team) in Michie Stadium, a 38,000-seat football stadium on the West Point campus.

The youth and football players formed a bond that day. “A lot of the players actually came from similar situations as our kids—very poor backgrounds, formerly homeless, from Queens close to where the Saratoga is—and the kids really got to connect with them,” says Pace. “It was a very natural bonding experience; it was really wonderful to see.”

“One of the older kids, Julius, he is usually very quiet,” says Anderson. “He is from Florida as is one of the cadets, and that connection helped him to open up. When we played football, Julius’ favorite sport, he looked pretty good! He looked right at home playing football with these college students.”

“In an unexpected turn of events, we found out our football team was having a spring football game at West Point,” says Cohen. The group took a second trip up to West Point to attend the Annual Black and Gold Spring Game in the stadium where they had played just a few weeks prior. They cheered especially loud for their new friends. “After the game, I asked all of the football players who were there for the pickup game to stay and sign autographs for the kids,” continues Cohen.

When the football season starts, Anderson plans to watch the games as part of the recreation program so that the group can continue cheering on their favorite team.

Players on West Point’s football team bonded with the children from the Saratoga, and invited them to attend their Annual Black and Gold Spring Game where they took the time to sign autographs for the group.



Battle of the Board Games

The second part of the project entailed a few of the cadets making the trip down to the Saratoga to spend some additional time with their new friends.

“We set up a board game tournament at the Saratoga so that they could tour what a shelter is like, experience our recreation program, and interact with the parents,” explains Pace. “They treated us to lunch up at West Point, so the kids hosted them at a very nice luncheon afterwards.”

More than 40 children and some parents gathered in the recreation room at the Saratoga to play games like Connect 4, Stratego, Uno, Battleship, and life-sized Jenga with the cadets, who wore their Army White Uniform, one of the Army’s dress uniforms. “That was super impressive to the kids,” says Pace.

Not only did the friendships that formed on the hike continue to grow even further over the course of the day, but having the cadets on their ‘home turf’ was meaningful for the youngsters. Living in a shelter, they are not able to have friends over to play. However, this experience offered them a fun, stress-free chance to enjoy childhood.

“CJ and I and a couple of the kids were playing life-size Jenga,” says Cohen. “There were kids all around us and it was hilarious. It was very normal. To see how happy those kids were just to be interacting with people and each other ... it was cool. It was a little, simple thing, but how hard we were all laughing together was awesome and very memorable.”

Playing games and having fun with the cadets offered a different dynamic than when the group went up to West Point. The day of fun helped the children to see the cadets as regular people with whom they could identify and look up to. “They are meeting young cadets who are future leaders, and they are saying ‘You can be that too,’” says Anderson. “A lot of parents were also very interested and began to think ‘Maybe my kids can do this.’”

Camp Cleanup

For the final part of the project, ten cadets travelled to HFH camps on a rainy Sunday to help clean it up for summer.

“We satisfied the project needs for volunteering in the community and working as a mentor with underserved kids, but we also needed volunteers to clean up at camp,” says Pace. The group was more than willing to assist.

The group raked and moved leaves, filling an entire dumpster with debris. The physically fit group proved to be an ideal pool of volunteers who played an essential role in providing homeless youth with an amazing summer camp experience.

Learning About Family Homelessness

In addition to the various projects that the cadets planned and participated in, HFH offered the cadets an additional opportunity to learn more about family homelessness. HFH president Dr. Ralph da Costa Nunez travelled to West Point to serve as the final guest lecturer in a series of lectures and workshops for the cadets’ class. Dr. Nunez has dedicated his life to working on behalf of homeless families. He has done so for more than

30 years at the city and state levels of government and in the non-profit sector.

“He provided a lecture to them on the history of homelessness in New York City, the challenges faced in the operation of shelters, and what it is like to make a difference with public policy around the subject of homelessness,” explains Pace.

“Dr. Nunez coming up gave us a chance to look at a really important issue in society,” says Summers.

Living in a shelter, the kids are not able to have a traditional playdate where they can invite friends over. The visit from the West Point cadets for the Battle of the Board Games, however, offered the kids at the Saratoga a fun and stress-free day.



“It tied together a lot of what we try to extract from the cadets throughout the semester. ‘What are you passionate about in life? What are the issues that mean the most to you? What is a way to think about those issues through a nuanced, critical thinking lens? And what are you going to do about it? How are you going to put forth effort to tackle that issue?’ It was cool for the cadets to see someone who has dedicated their life to an issue.”

The Power of a Positive Influence

In all, the service project provided a valuable experience for both the kids and the cadets.

Children living in poverty have a higher risk of developing a variety of social, emotional, and behavioral problems, however, the development of positive relationships can help to offset this impact. The importance of role models in the lives of these children cannot be overstated. They look to role models as an example of who they can be and role models help shape how they behave in school and relationships.

“The cadets are excellent role models—they see things through,” says Pace. “They are extremely respectful and polite, have strong integrity, incredible listening skills, and they are very purposeful in what they are doing. The quality of their character is very impressive. I think the academy does a tremendous job; we benefited greatly from the training they provide to the cadets because our kids get to be around remarkable young adults.”

“It makes an impact for the kids to have someone to look up to and to encourage them—especially someone who is not too far off in age from them,” says Lindsay. “Apparently when there are older adults the kids sometimes do not identify as easily with them, but they find that the kids respond more to interactions with younger volunteers.”

“The impact of such strong role models is immense,” added Anderson. “The kids got to have more positivity around them. The more positive influences they have surrounding them, the better.”

Even the parents recognized the important role the cadets were playing in the lives of their children. One of the moms approached Cohen to thank him for taking the time to be a positive influence in her child’s life and emphasizing how important an older brother or father figure can be. “In my life, my dad was one of the biggest influences that got me where



As Major Summers explains, the importance of having West Point cadets participate in acts of service, such as helping to clean up winter debris at Homes for the Homeless Summer Camps, is to help form connections and share perspectives that are meaningful for everyone involved.

I am today, so when the mom approached me and said, ‘The fact that you guys are here to be that older brother figure, even for an hour, a day, or a weekend or two, it means that much more to them. They need that in their lives more than they need a new pair of shoes,’ ... that was very meaningful.”

The most important lesson the group learned from the cadets, however, was that college and success is within their reach if they apply themselves.

10 Tips to Effectively Collaborate with a Nonprofit

- Look for organizations that are a natural fit with your own organization and your needs.
- Collaborations need to be beneficial for both organizations.
- Make sure expectations are clearly communicated (both verbally and in a written project outline).
- If the project is ongoing, have a memorandum of understanding to outline everybody's role.
- Maintain communication between point people, touching base before an event and debriefing afterwards.
- Evaluate what went well, what did not go well, and areas for improvement.
- You cannot just look for people to do grunt work; let them do the fun projects, too.
- Make sure volunteers understand the impact of their hard work.
- Do not overextend yourself. It is not about the number of collaborations, but about their quality.
- One-time projects are of value, but you also need to build longer-term, repeating collaborations.

“College should be part of the plan for the children here and it is often not,” explains Anderson. “They are just trying to get out of middle school. They are not thinking along the lines of planning for their future because they understandably have other more pressing issues. We are planting the seed now that college is part of the plan.”

“The kids were inspired to see something long-term for themselves. That they could go on to higher education, that there are opportunities out there, that you can get a great education subsidized if you apply yourself and have really good grades and do community service,” added Pace. “They could end up being a West Point cadet themselves. It helped them see their future is in their grasp—that they can cultivate where they want to go.”

In fact, many of them were encouraged by their interactions with the cadets. “The kids wanted to move in with the cadets—to be their roommates,” recalls Pace.

One young boy, Giovanni, was very clearly in his element around the cadets. Although the trip to West Point was organized for the older participants of the Saratoga recreation program, he was so persistent that they allowed him to attend. He ended up leading the hike alongside the cadets. “It definitely sparked something for him,” suggests Pace. “I see this connection and I believe that he will jump at any opportunity to do these types

of activities. If this one boy is inspired to do well academically and to follow his dreams, this is worthwhile.”

Developing a Passion

The cadets were also inspired and learned a lot from their time with the boys and girls. “It has been such a blessing to us to be able to interact with and learn from them,” says Lindsay. “We realize that we are given a ton of opportunities at West Point and I think it is always good to remember that we have those opportunities and that we need to consider people who may not have so much right at their fingertips.”

“While I am sure there were many benefits from the children's perspective, there was also a huge benefit from the cadets' perspectives,” says Summers. “They saw the struggles that others go through and felt the amount of appreciation that a child can show toward you in the five hours you spend with them throughout the day.”

“I think they developed a passion they did not even know they had,” continued Summers. “The cadets were grateful to have that experience with the children. I do not think they saw it as putting themselves out there; they saw it as being on the receiving end of something really special.”

“They were very focused on making it a rewarding opportunity for our children and I commend them for their dedication to the project,” says Pace.

The cadets emphasized that although the class sparked the project, this experience was much more than an assignment to them. They plan on continuing their work with the community and with Homes for the Homeless.

At the Academy, each cadet holds a position within his or her company (a group of about 120 cadets of all different class years). Inspired by the work with Homes for the Homeless over the past few months, Lindsay requested to be Community Service Officer for her company. “I will have the opportunity to encourage and provide ways for my company to get involved,” she says. “The relationship that we have established with Homes for the Homeless will hopefully provide an opportunity for me to encourage more of my classmates to get involved in that.”

“When you are doing something for someone else, it can ignite passions that you did not know you had,” says Summers. “When those passions surface, that can be an enlightening moment where you think ‘Now I realize this is something that makes me tick. This is something I really care about and I would like to think about more or study more or dedicate part of my life to.’” ■