UNO SPRING BREAK

Time off to help others

If visions of college students drinking and partying are what come to mind when the term "spring break" is used, consider this: For the 10th year in a row, hundreds of University of Nebraska at Omaha students will help others rather than themselves.

No sandy beaches, but that never seems to bother the young men and women — more than 1,700 this year — who participate in Seven Days of Service, a volunteer event that began Saturday. Students disperse around the Omaha metropolitan area to help Habitat for Humanity, Lauritzen Gardens, the St. Stephen Center, Keep Council Bluffs Beautiful and 10 more nonprofit institutions.

The students renovate, repair, paint, build, plant or, in general, do what needs to be done for the nonprofits they help and for the people the nonprofits help. The project began in 2003 with seven students from a service-learning class. They rounded up a total of 70 volunteers, who worked on two houses. The project grew from there.
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At first, Seven Days of Service was the only community service project at UNO. Now there are 16 service days during the academic year that collectively, over the past 10 years, have contributed $2.3 million in work to the Omaha area. Some 4,000 hours of work were given just last year during Seven Days of Service, according to UNO’s Kathe Oleson Lyons.

Lyons, who coordinates service projects, said students tend to return year after year, sometimes asking for the same assignments. They “take ownership” of their projects, she said. About 95 percent of them will be back the next year to volunteer again. Some, Lyons said, return to the nonprofits they helped and become regular, year-round volunteers.

A few young volunteers do jobs directly related to their university studies, Lyons said. Construction science majors may help plan construction projects. Public relations majors interact with the media. The project teaches them a lot about leadership and event management, she added.

All of the various projects are popular with some volunteers, she said, but one activity — demolition — is an attention-getter. “They really love any kind of demolition, tearing things down,” she said.

Many colleges do spring-break service projects, she said, but UNO is unusual in that it concentrates on the local community. Often, she said, students elsewhere travel to other parts of the country or around the globe to do their good works. It’s important for UNO students “to learn that they can serve right here at home” and that there is a local need, she said.

UNO’s wonderful focus on community stewardship and its efforts to instill in its students a broader view of Omaha and its people are as welcome as the spring crocuses now blooming. The long-term commitment the program fosters is welcome indeed.

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THE PUBLIC Хоувер

Council vote strengthens

On March 13, Omaha City Council Members Ben Gray, Pete Festsen, Chris and Garry Gerhardt made history by passing the Equal Employment Opportunity Council vote not only represents a significant step forward for the city, but it also reflects the values of the people and businesses that live and work in the city of Omaha.

Contrary to what was expressed by some council members who did not support its passage, the ordinance is not divisive or unifying. It unifies us around the values and principles of inclusion, justice and respect for all people — not just some.

It does not threaten individual freedom. It protects them. Furthermore, it positions Omaha among a growing number of national cities of similar size who value diversity and welcomes all law-abiding citizens of society.

Inclusive Communities is proud to have served as a member of Equal Omaha’s coalition of allies, individuals from the LGBTQ community, of businesses, small and of organizations with a shared belief — that a community is not weakened by diversity. It is strengthened by it.

Barbara Angel
Executive Director
Inclusive Communities

No need for discrimination

Wait and see. The Omaha City Council just opened the floodgates for more laws protecting individuals against discrimination nationwide.

I believe there are laws protecting individuals against discrimination nationwide.

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