

by Beth Douglass Silcox

# Our SERVICE

Teaching Kids to Lead the Way and Give as They Go



Some 360 pairs of bare feet, peeking from under green and white robes, walked into a central Indiana high-school graduation ceremony this spring. It wasn't a senior class conspiracy, but a student-inspired, communitywide service project aimed at raising awareness for the 300 million shoeless people around the world.

Ditching their shoes at graduation was only one aspect of the students' tennis shoe drive in conjunction with Samaritan's Feet, an international nonprofit that hopes to collect and distribute 10 million pairs of shoes to the world's needy in just 10 years.

The Westfield High School seniors took their message to the community at large and walked (sans shoes) into the local mayor's office, convincing him and other city employees to join them barefoot for one day. Some 3,000 pairs of tennis shoes and \$1,600 later, the 17- and 18-year-olds had not only helped prevent disease and injury for those in need of shoes, but had strengthened their own community by bringing the members of the community together for a common cause.

**Giving to Receive**

Joe Milan gains confidence by volunteering at a local living history museum.



**Service and volunteerism is a learned social behavior that can start in childhood.**

Andrew Hancock

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## Service-Oriented Roots Run Deep

So much for complaints about self-serving teens. These central Indiana high-schoolers and their counterparts across the country are contributing to their communities more than ever. Eighty-six percent of U.S. high schools encourage or offer community service opportunities, and colleges look favorably upon service-oriented experiences when determining acceptance. Some 8.2 million 16- to 24-year-olds volunteered last year, according to the Corporation for National & Community Service, a federal agency dedicated to strengthening communities and fostering civic engagement through service and volunteering.

This generation's service-oriented roots run so deep that these young adults judge potential colleges and employers by the quantity and quality of service opportunities available. Can we then assume they'll choose to live in communities meeting the same criteria? If so, competition will surely rise among communities hoping to attract and develop a service-oriented citizenship, working for the betterment of all who live in them.

But service-oriented citizens don't simply appear overnight. Service and volunteerism is a learned social behavior that can start in childhood with mom's and dad's encouragement or as members of the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Catholic Youth Organization, 4-H and Key clubs.



**Charity Begins at Home**  
Beth and Todd Hoard teach charity by example to their kids Mattie, 8; Henry, 7; and John, 5.

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## It Starts with Mom and Dad

Parents play a big role in modeling charitable behavior to kids. With a baby strapped to her front and two toddlers in tow, Beth Hoard, a Westfield, Ind., mom and occupational therapist, stepped up when a local food bank lacked volunteers to unload Thanksgiving donations. Mattie and Henry, then 3 and 2 years old, respectively, were big enough to tote boxes of crackers and instant potatoes, one at a time, from the truck to the shelves.



## Finding that Inner, Service-Oriented Child

➤ Advocate for service-learning in your local schools by forwarding articles, Web links and other resources, like Bring Learning to Life materials offered by Learn and Serve America.

➤ Get involved with young people through church, community centers or scouting and guide them through a service-learning project. Trick-or-treat for canned goods, instead of candy at Halloween, and help stock food bank shelves before the Thanksgiving rush.

➤ Volunteer and take your kids along.

➤ Look for everyday ways for kids to contribute to the world around them, no matter their age. If your child loves hiking in the woods, take a plastic bag along and make a game of picking up trash along the trail.

➤ Tap your child's talents and passions for service-learning. If your teen plays guitar or sings, volunteer as song leader at local campfire programs for kids.

➤ Be thankful and show it to your kids. The *why* in service-learning is important, and kids need to develop empathy for those less fortunate. That means appreciating their own blessings first.



➤ Bring *giving* into the spending and saving equation. Using recycled jars or cans, parents can introduce the concept of budgeting, not only for purchases, but also for giving and saving by dividing allowances between the three containers.

➤ Make service a holiday tradition.

➤ Do unto others, *as they need* you to do unto them.

Sources include MomItForward.com and ServiceLearning.org.



In the five years since, the trio of kids, which now includes 5-year-old baby brother John, has delivered meals to shut-in neighbors, participated in park cleanup days that Beth organizes like Easter egg hunts, and helped Mom run a church donation program. When Mattie, now 8, spied closeout hats, gloves and mittens at a local department store this summer, she intuitively knew there were kids in her hometown who would need them this winter. Shopping with a \$250 church donation, she led the way to purchasing hundreds of items at bargain prices.

"I want our kids to be good citizens, appreciate the things they have and the opportunities that we can provide," Hoard says. "It's neat to see their sense of pride and self-esteem."

Jyl Johnson Pattee gives parents practical tips online about raising service-oriented, giving and charitable children. She suggests that honest conversation about the hows and whys of community service is a great place to start. Progress charts and positive verbal reinforcement, as well as service-oriented holiday

traditions and vacations, keep kids motivated and instill gratitude and giving. Pattee advises parents to also consider teaching a twist on the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as they need you to do unto them"—find the need and fulfill it.

**"When kids generate ideas, they are so much more meaningful."**

—Todd Lambert

### Empowering Teens

Volunteerism is empowering; just ask history-buff Joe Milan, who started volunteering as a sixth-grader at Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, a living history museum. Joe, now a 16-year-old sophomore at Westfield High School, dedicates at least 200 hours each year to his duties, safely instructing kids how to throw axes in a Lenape Indian camp, teaching leatherwork, gardening and interacting with visitors.

"Up until the time I started volunteering, I wasn't the most outgoing person," Joe says. "But at Conner Prairie, you have to be friendly and talkative, initiate conversation and read people's body language." Those skills came in handy when he started high school last year. Making new friends was easier.

Joe's mom, Jeannie Milan, says volunteering boosted her son's self-esteem. "He's grown, and it's really helped him become his own person and find himself. The amount of pride he has in what he does there has done so much for him."

Service opportunities are everywhere. Sometimes it takes parents nudging kids along. Other times, kids lead. But projects are in the works right now and opportunities exist in towns and cities, large and small, old and new. Their worth can't be measured simply by the personal gains of the children involved or the organizations that benefit. Communities feel their impact as well.

### Investigate, Plan, Engage, Think, Celebrate

Frequently, it is in school where kids begin learning about service. School districts like Westfield Washington—which stress character education, including



responsibility, respect, compassion, hard work and honesty—often use an educational method known as service-learning to introduce skills like collaboration, innovation and communication. “These are skills that promote success in life,” says Todd Lambert, executive director of learning systems at Westfield Washington Schools.

Service-learning teaches young people how to investigate a need within their community. They then develop a plan to meet that need, engage in necessary activities, think about the impact of those activities on their community and celebrate successes. “When kids generate ideas, they are so much more meaningful to them,” Lambert says. “It’s remarkable to sit with a group of young kids who

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**Best Foot Forward**  
Westfield High School senior class officers Alexandra Barker, Hannah Adams, Shawna Grosenbacher and Katrina Gerlach led the communitywide shoe drive.

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really care about their community, and just sit back and let them go to work.”

When tied to academic standards and learning objectives, service-learning can improve student academic achievement. But it can also make less measurable improvements, such as increasing student engagement, improving social behavior, building civic skills and strengthening community bonds.

Nearly \$20 million in grants went to schools, tribes, and faith-based and community groups this year to fund service-learning programs in the United States.

Learn and Serve America, part of the Corporation for National & Community Service, oversees the grant process. Spokesman Sandy Scott says, “Think of Learn and Serve America as an on-ramp to a lifetime of civic engagement. We’re trying to institutionalize service-learning... and make service a part of the daily life of every American.” The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse ([ServiceLearning.org](http://ServiceLearning.org)) is an informational resource to grantees, teachers and parents interested in getting kids involved in community service.

### **Impacting Community Growth**

When those barefooted, service-oriented teens stepped into Mayor Andy Cook’s office earlier this year, confident in their ability to sell him on a shoeless day at Westfield City Hall, he was more than happy to oblige.

Communities like Westfield exist all across the country. Today, small towns, once miles and miles from the nearest shopping mall,



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morph into bedroom communities around larger cities almost overnight. Population growth of 160 percent in eight years escalates a once-small town to city status, but community spirit wanes when those people don't know one another.

“Communities drift apart through growth or indifference and lose that sense of community, but if you put service and volunteerism back into the mix, suddenly you redevelop that sense of community,” Cook says.

Volunteerism is essential for building a sense of pride and ownership in any community. With the help of service-oriented adults and kids, Westfield is emerging anew. Volunteer-driven revitalization plans for the heart of the city are in the works. Local artisans, restaurateurs and agricultural vendors exhibit at outdoor markets and art festivals. A troop of high-school Girl Scout

volunteers are remodeling Santa's house and run a free, community ice-skating rink each winter.

“We want to create a quality of life where Westfield's kids want to come back here after college,” Cook says. “We want them to love their lives here and come back here to raise their own kids.”

Communities and individuals thrive through collaboration, innovation and communication. Introducing those skills at a young age through service-learning can have big payoffs for kids like the Hoards and Joe Milan. And a service-oriented citizenship, no matter how old or young, helps cities like Westfield relocate a sense of community and speeds economic, cultural and social improvements. Service makes a difference, and as Cook says, “For us, it's beginning to happen.” **S**

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