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Teacher Helps Students Experience the Joy of Giving

"It's kids helping kids," says Paula Mueller, describing the Wishes for Santa/Giving Tree Program at Neuqua Valley High School. The Neuqua chemistry teacher and mother of two became involved with the Alliance for the Children ten years ago. The volunteer group donates gifts and clothing to needy children at Christmas. Most of the packages go to families in the Appalachia region. Several years ago, Paula asked her students to help with the effort, and now the entire school participates. Paula has traveled to Appalachia each year to deliver the gifts to schools who handle the distribution to families. "The response from the students here has been amazing," says Paula. Here are some of Paula's thoughts about encouraging youth to be involved in service projects.

Why is it important to introduce teens to public service in high school? Every teenager has the desire to help others. They just need the right venue. With the support of former principal, Dr. Kathy Birkett, voluntary participation in the Wishes for Santa/Giving Tree program became a staple of the school's advisory curriculum by teaching kids about "paying forward" their talents and resources.

With a busy life as a mother and a teacher, what motivates you to be part of the Alliance for the Children? The Alliance for the Children does not have any paid employees--even the director is a volunteer. All of the donations go to helping kids. Not many charities can claim that. With only 5 core volunteers, there is an incredible amount of work that goes into being a part of this organization.

If you could have one thing to help the needy families, what would it be? "Need" can be financial, emotional, or physical. If I could give one thing to needy families, it would be hope. You need to have hope that things will get better and they will.

Do you have a favorite teaching memory you can share? I have a unique opportunity to watch kids mature and to play a role in that transformation is a privilege. The most moving experience for me as a teacher is having kids come back after graduation to tell me that I had a positive impact on them. Teaching is about making a difference in the life of a child.

– Interviewed by Judy Buchenot

