

Oakland County

Oakland County Extension
1200 N. Telegraph Rd, Bldg 26 E
Pontiac, MI 48341-0416

P: 248-858-0880
F: 248-858-1477

E-mail: msue.oakland@county.msu.edu
Web: www.msue.msu.edu/oakland

Autumn 2008

Empowering young people to make a difference



Caring for neglected animals was just one of many service-learning activities in the Summer of Service program.

It's not easy to be an eighth-grader in July. At 14 years-old you're too young for a summer job, but too old for most children's programs. You're probably feeling a bit disconnected, because you're making the transition from middle school to high school, but don't belong to either one during the summer.

To help these young people build a sense of belonging and celebrate their skills, Oakland County 4-H Youth Development launched the *Summer of Service* initiative in 2008. This program involved middle school students in community projects, highlighting a different issue each week. The participants learned about the challenges of hunger, animal neglect, educational quality and more.

Most importantly, they took action and made a positive impact on each of those issues.

Thanks to the students' efforts, neglected and abused horses now have a new pasture at the Equine Star Foundation in White Lake and the Baldwin Center of Pontiac boasts a community garden to provide fresh vegetables for the hungry.

The *Summer of Service* initiative is based on the principles of service-learning, which includes taking time to reflect on the skills and knowledge gained through the activities. In surveys and post-project discussions, the young people revealed that the experience had a profound impact upon them:

- By the end of the program, 92 percent of the *Summer of Service* participants stated that they "have the skills to make a positive difference in the community."
- Prior to their involvement in *Summer of Service*, 46 percent of the young people had never volunteered in their community, or had only volunteered once. On the post-program surveys, 82 percent expressed a desire to not only continue their own service experience, but also to invite other youth to join them.
- Mentoring from adult volunteers reinforced the participants' feelings that they are valued members of the community. All of the young people *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement, "Adults pay attention to me and care about what I think."

Continued

"I learned that I can help the community, even though I'm a kid."

- 13 year-old *Summer of Service* participant

Summer of Service—continued

The success of the inaugural *Summer of Service* program will fuel an expanded initiative in 2009. Young people who participated this year will become the planning team for next year's projects and share their skills as peer leaders. Each of them reflected on moments that were personally meaningful for them, which they will draw upon as they recruit friends and classmates for the new activities.

Service-learning is based on the conviction that young people should be the architects of their own service experiences. Because middle school students are being empowered, 2009 will be a very exciting year to be an eighth-grader in Oakland County.



Summer of Service participants celebrate a successful project with one of the equine beneficiaries.

Cultural program increases communication

For 8 year-old Mai Ya Xiong, creating a new life in America was a challenging experience. Her family lived in the Ban Vanai refugee camp in Thailand, after fleeing their village in Laos following the Vietnam War. Her story is told through a compelling book for young readers titled "Mai Ya's Long Journey."

The book became the centerpiece of an innovative summer program that brought together a diverse group of students in Pontiac. For Hmong youth, Mai Ya's story paralleled their families' histories. Young people of other ethnicities participated in the *Me & Mai* program to learn more about the Hmong culture.

Their reading was augmented with experiential learning activities to explore cultural traditions. Through traditional music, art, language, history, games and storytelling, participants gained insights about the impact of culture and identity in their daily lives.



Participants in the Me & Mai Summer 4-H Program build cross-cultural communication skills through teambuilding activities.

Though more than 200,000 Hmong refugees have arrived in the United States in the past 30 years, their stories aren't always conveyed to the younger generation. Fewer than half of the students participating in the *Me & Mai* program had ever heard the details of their family's journey to America. They engaged in activities to discuss the challenges of balancing traditional Hmong values with modern American customs, and were equipped with conversation starters to share with their parents at home. In this way, the program increased cross-generational communication.

"The Me & Mai program was an opportunity for more people to learn about another culture and create talking points for family discussion."

- Caroline Vang,
program coordinator

Me & Mai also improved cross-cultural communication. Though Hmong students are a significant proportion of the student body in Pontiac Public Schools, they have few opportunities to share their culture with classmates. Because there is comfort in familiarity, students tend to self-segregate along racial/ethnic lines within the schools. The summer program provided a safe space for young people to cross those invisible barriers and learn more about each other as individuals.

Contact: Tom Schneider,
4-H Youth Development Educator
(248) 858-0889

For more information about any of MSU Extension's innovative programs, visit our web site at:
www.msue.msu.edu/oakland
or call 248-858-0880