



Kids Making a Difference: Volunteers Give From the Heart

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka, MSW

In this fast-paced world, it's easy for kids to focus on what they want to acquire next to feel happier, more popular or more entertained. But there is a piece of the human experience we could all use more of: community service.

There is no better way to feel more connected or more satisfied than to give a bit of happiness to someone else. Kids Korps USA™, a nonprofit youth volunteer organization founded in San Diego provides meaningful opportunities for families to spend time together in community service activities. Children ages 5 to 12 can volunteer with Kids Korps and youths ages 13 to 18 can continue their participation in Teen Korps, part of the same organization.

Wide Variety of Projects

A sampling from Kids Korps' activity calendar includes projects with Habitat for Humanity, the Special Olympics, women's resource centers, senior centers, children's hospitals, homeless shelters, beach clean-ups and graffiti paint-outs.

Anna Lillian, of Rancho Santa Fe, is Chapter Leader for the first and oldest chapter of Kids Korps. Her chapter recently wrote letters to military personnel in Iraq. Lillian's chapter also visits nursing homes, where the kids play bingo and make blankets with the seniors. The kids enjoy giving pizza parties and hosting plays for foster kids and Head Start preschoolers as well.

The inspiring list of ways children can help others goes on. Lillian's chapter has helped build bikes that were then donated. Another popular event is filling comfort bags, in which an amazing assembly line stuffs bags with blankets, teddy bears and games for children in shelters. In two days, Kids Korps prepares about 10,000 bags.

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Instill Volunteerism At a Young Age

“My 7-year old has been involved since he was five and he has fun serving the homeless; they put out the placemats and napkins and clean up,” Lillian says. “The whole idea is to instill the concept of volunteerism in children at a young age. If you don’t grow up with it, when you become an adult it’s not an easy thing to do, it’s not a natural part of you.”

When the chapter visited the foster kids, the volunteers interviewed their new buddies and then introduced them to the whole group, including a fun detail such as the child’s favorite book or ice cream flavor. The pride on both sides was apparent. In speaking in front of a group, the activity instilled leadership in the volunteers. Lillian says, “The foster children felt so good and important because all eyes were on them; they were being introduced. It was a wonderful interaction.”

Some of the activities may be the kids’ first experience talking to a homeless person or a critically ill child, and parents should give thought to preparing their children in a way that lessens any jitters the young volunteers may have. Before visiting Children’s Hospital, Kids Korps requires all volunteers to watch a video to help them feel more comfortable in approaching kids who are critically ill.

Empathy, Leadership, Responsibility

Through participation in Kids Korps activities, children develop their sense of empathy, gain skills in leadership and responsibility, as well as learn that they are capable of making a difference in their community.

“It’s not a difficult thing to do, it’s a fun thing to do,” Lillian says. As a bonus, in the upbeat, team-building atmosphere of the Kids Korps activities, it’s easy to make long-lasting friendships. Some volunteers have been active with the organization since its beginning, 10 years ago.

Earn Community Service Credits

Cindy Bloch is one of Kids Korps’ founding members and was the regional president for the past two years. She has 18-year-old twins who went from Kids Korps to Teen Korps and will graduate from high school this year. High schools and even some middle schools now require community service points. Teen Korps provides an avenue through which students can earn their community service credits.

Gain Perspective and Get Closer as a Family

Bloch and her twins were at the very first Kids Korps project in 1995 and continue to be active volunteers. “Most kids go through various stages when they may be a little less than gracious, and you want them to display a little bit of appreciation and perspective on their own lives,” says Bloch.

“If they’ve never talked to children who are not well or who have disabilities, or adults who are very elderly or kids who live in shelters, if all they’ve seen are their safe, snug lives, they will have no way to gain perspective.”

Bloch thanks Kids Korps for helping her raise children with a strong, grounded foundation and also for bringing her family closer together. “We do it together as a family. I’ve worked at soup kitchens when my dad was visiting from New Jersey and my dad, my husband and I would serve together. I credit Kids Korps for much of the joy that my family has shared.”

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Kids Korps presents a solution to parents who yearn to volunteer in some way, but feel they don't have the time. Bloch says, "When I wanted to volunteer in my community, I didn't want to do something that would take me away from my kids. Kids Korps has allowed me to be involved with a worthwhile, citywide organization and be with my children at the same time." Bloch intends to remain active with Kids Korps even after her children graduate from high school and the organization.

Joy of Giving

Natalie Sager, Chapter Leader of the Diegueño Country School in Rancho Santa Fe and board member, is also the Vice President in Charge of Chapter Liaison. When she organizes activities, she tries to step back and pull the parents back as well. "Let your child plant that tree. Let your child serve that meal," says Sager. It's an exercise in giving children credit for what they are truly capable of and allowing the kids to feel the joy of giving.

Kids Korps often goes down to an orphanage in Tijuana to spend the day with the children. "We bring lunch and crafts," says Sager. "My daughter doesn't speak Spanish and these kids don't speak English and yet they spend all day playing together. They play hangman with the few words they might know in Spanish and English. They eat together. My daughter now says she has a friend in Mexico; it's our favorite event."

Sager and her daughter also enjoyed planting a tree in partnership with People for Trees, another popular Kids Korps activity. The group meets in a downtown location and volunteers are dispersed in small groups. "The hole is already dug, there's a tree sitting there in a tub, and there are shovels," says Sager. "So it's very easy, and the kids get dirty and they love it. We came back a year later and saw the tree and how much it had grown over the course of the year."

Several Thousand Volunteers

Kids Korps took part in the prestigious California Governor's Conference on Women and Family in December of 2004 as part of the first Volunteer Village. Robin Chappelow, Kids Korps' Regional Program Director, says, "We started with a handful of kids and now have several thousand youth volunteers in seven states." Most of the organization's volunteers are active in San Diego County, where Kids Korps began.

Channel Their Energy

Chappelow explains that today's young people are the philanthropists of tomorrow. "I always tell everybody that our kids have two things we as adults don't have: a lot of time and a lot of energy. We want to see them channel [their time and energy] in the right way. If we provide them with something very powerful and meaningful, something that brings them purpose and self esteem, we've done our job right."

Carolyn Girard, a board member and North County chapter leader with five children, says, "I look at who I want them to be as adults. When they're out on their own it's so important that they get the big picture, that life isn't just about them. It's about community, giving of themselves and participating."

Lead Fulfilling Lives

Kids Korps volunteers are learning how to lead fulfilling lives and shine with happiness by focusing on how they can make a difference. They are giving from the heart and our communities are reaping the benefits.

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The 10th anniversary Kids Korps Gala will be held at the Four Seasons Aviara Resort in Carlsbad on Saturday, March 5th. For ticket information and to learn more about the organization visit www.KidsKorps.org.

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Ondine Brooks Kuraoka, MSW is a freelance writer from San Diego. Her website is www.sandiegofreelancewriter.com.