

FEATURES

# Students in YMCA's teen volunteer program learn from hands-on experiences

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YMCA teen volunteers Lexi Saki, left, Shelby Seu and Chloe Kelly prepare snacks that will be put into sack lunches for Wahiawa as Paul Matsumoto assists.

Breaking stereotypes and stigmas are among the biggest takeaways that Chloe Kelly has gained since embarking on the Houseless Initiative, a project through the YMCA's teen volunteer program.

"It may sound cliché, but I've learned not to judge a book by its cover," said the Mililani High School senior.

The teens are not just delivering food to the homeless community. They have taken the time to get to know these individuals over the past year, she explained.

"People think because they are homeless that they don't work or that they do drugs," Kelly said. "The people we meet do have jobs; they just don't make enough to have a house."

Once a week, teen volunteers pack 50 nutritional sack lunches, which include a sandwich, a bag of chips, an apple or orange and water or juice, to deliver to the homeless in the Wahiawa community.

Grant money was received for the Houseless Initiative launch, but Kelly says it's now fully funded by monthly baby-sitting nights that the teens host.

The teen programs are designed to provide hands-on learning experiences that encourage the youth to become changemakers and leaders in the community.

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Kelly also serves as the youth governor, elected by her peers through the YMCA Youth and Government program, formerly known as the First Model Constitution. The program offers middle and high school students a hands-on approach to researching and addressing community issues through the legislative process. Students learn parliamentary procedures by electing their own governor, speaker of the House and Senate president. The teens draft, debate and vote on their own bills and resolutions in a mock legislative session.

"We write newsletters, research bills and focus on the issues that are important to us," said Krysta Reese, a junior at Mililani High School. "We debate about things that we care about. You feel safe. It's not scary even though there's a lot of hot topics."



Joie Agoo, a junior at Mililani High School, affectionately spoke about one of her favorite initiatives, the YMCA's Hiroshima exchange program.

"Let's Get Together" was started in 1961 between Honolulu Hi-Y (boys) and Tri-Hi-Y (girls) clubs and the Hiroshima YMCA. It's the longest-running international student exchange program in the nation.

"Even though we are oceans apart, we have so much in common. It's an exchange of culture and friendship that keeps developing," Agoo said. She first went to stay with a host family when she was in eighth grade.

"I was the youngest person going from Hawaii. I was scared. It was my first time out of the country," she said.

Agoo, Kelly and Reese all went on the cultural exchange trip to Japan last year.

"We got to experience new things together," Agoo said.

When the students come to Hawaii from Hiroshima, the girls and other participants take them to places like the USS Arizona Memorial and Polynesian Cultural Center.

"One of the things that we do at the Y is teach leadership skills to the teens to get them out of their comfort zone," Bryan Murphy, YMCA teen director, said.

"We want to create civic-minded individuals so that they think about and look at issues from both sides of the spectrum. They are learning to stand up for what they believe in, and that's the intrinsic benefit of the programs."

Depending on the time of year and what projects are being handled, the teens may volunteer for up to 20 hours each week.



Longtime volunteer Jimmy Tomita had similar experiences through the YMCA teen programs. He joined his first club in 1953 when he was a senior at Saint Louis High School.

He worked on community service projects such as beach cleanups, but he admits he originally joined, along with his buddies, for the social aspects.

The first Hi-Y Club was formed in October 1918 at McKinley High School. The YMCA of Honolulu had the third-largest Hi-Y program in the United States with 277 clubs by 1964.

"We met kids from other schools and had socials with the girls club," he said. Among the events he remembers fondly are the moonlight picnics. "Ala Moana Beach Park was a popular place to have them. Of course, we had adult advisers to keep us on the right path."

The advisers played a personal role in helping Tomita learn about banking, college and how to stay out of trouble, he explained.

He went into military service for four years and returned to the island to pursue his college degree.

"This one girl struck my fancy. I wanted to make the grade with her," he said. Since she worked at the YMCA, he decided to volunteer as an adviser to impress her. Although he planned for it to be short term, he continued gaining certifications and is still volunteering for the youth swim team today.

"There were times that I considered leaving the Y, but something else would come up," he said.

"It was great working with these kids. You'd get to know them really well," he said. "The experience was invaluable. I got more out of it than I put into it."

And he got the girl. He married Doris Sugimoto, and they have been together for 59 years. (She started as a volunteer adviser, became a youth director and went up the ranks to eventually become executive director and chief operating officer. She retired in 2005.)

"Now the thought of leaving the Y never crosses my mind," Tomita said. "It makes me feel like I'm doing something, that I'm making a difference."