

Students Find Summer Mission in Dallas

Written by {{Tiesha Henderson - Black College Wire}}

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Black College Wire

Nicole Brown, a sophomore at historically black Oakwood College in Huntsville, Ala., has taken a year off from coursework and says the experience has changed her life.

She has spent the year as a volunteer with an organization called the National Association for the Prevention of Starvation, most recently helping children in needy neighborhoods in Dallas.

"Summer breaks and Christmas breaks are not enough for me," she said. "I just see so many people that need to be encouraged. So many people's lives need to be changed and I can do so much within one year.

"This has been the best year of my life," Brown continued. "I've never been so happy. I've never had so much joy."

[NAPS](#) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1978 at Oakwood College. Through feeding programs, advocacy and mentoring, young adult members try to address children's hunger on many levels. One goal is to encourage the children to see education as a way up and out of poverty.

In Dallas, the students saw an opportunity: More than 99,000 Dallas children face problems linked to being poor, including low school performance, teenage pregnancy and juvenile crime, according to Frances Deviney, Texas director of [Kids Count](#), a national program that tracks the status of children.

"It is only by government and communities coming together that we can hope to pull families and children out of poverty," Deviney said. "One without the other cannot do it alone."

More than 30 percent of all Dallas children under 18 live in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, compiled in 2004, the most recent information available.

"What is particularly concerning about these data is the fact that so many other indicators of child welfare are strongly associated with poverty: infant mortality, school performance, teen birth, juvenile violent crime," Deviney said. "Unless we combat the underlying problem of child poverty, children will continue to struggle in those related areas for the foreseeable future."

Volunteers from Oakwood and NAPS traveled almost 700 miles in four passenger vans to Dallas this



Photo credit: El Centro College
The day camp at the Salvation Army's Cedar Crest Corps in Dallas welcomed 15 to 18 Oakwood College volunteers this summer.

summer after seeing a story on CNN.

"We were looking at the news and we saw the Dallas Independent School District and the violence going on in the school system," said Francisco Cross, the association's missions director. "So what better place and time to help these young people, who in most cases come from broken families with no father figure or no mother figure?"

Oakwood is affiliated with the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Although NAPS is headquartered on Oakwood's campus, the association has no affiliation with the school or any religious association. However, many of its members are Oakwood students.

In Dallas, NAPS volunteers work with a day camp at the Salvation Army's Cedar Crest Corps. They are coordinating service efforts with several South Oak Cliff schools, including Roosevelt and South Oak Cliff high schools.

"It's been a blessing. They're great kids," said Rodney Hinkle, the corps administrator of the Salvation Army center. "You always hear negative things about our youth, but these 15 to 18 students have been nothing but a positive and good influence to not only our kids, but the seniors that we have in our senior program."

After he became director of the center in September, Hinkle said, one of his goals was to increase enrollment in its summer day camp. It has grown from eight students last year to more than 30. He attributed this to a decision to lower the price of the camp to \$30 per week, and to the help the program receives from its NAPS volunteers.

Through its feeding, educational, medical and building programs, the organization has completed missions around the world, with chapters in India, Zambia, Madagascar, Jamaica and other countries.

Children's program director Julie-Anne "Jewel" Satterfield said the group was supposed to return to India this summer to work at a school built to serve Indian descendants of African slaves. However, the plans fell through and NAPS remained stateside, dividing its energies between Hurricane Katrina relief efforts in Lake Charles, La., and young people in Dallas.

"We said, 'Hey, the Lord closed these doors, but there's work that needs to be done right here in our backyard,'" said Satterfield, a 2005 Oakwood graduate who now works full-time with NAPS.

At the Dallas day camp, Satterfield said, the volunteers teach about being good citizens; respecting parents, elders and teachers; and the importance of teamwork.

"We teach them about moral issues, about the Bible," she said. "We try to show them that we love them and we care about them."

Deviney, the Texas Kids Count director, said there might be additional benefits. "Hopefully these students will be an inspiration to local kids their age who want to help, but maybe don't know how," she said. "I think it is wonderful when communities come together, even from across state lines, to help one another."

Run primarily by students, NAPS is financially supported by donations collected during spring, Thanksgiving, Christmas and summer breaks. The students solicit through their Web site, and they canvass

neighborhoods and downtown areas telling people about their work.

During a neighborhood visit in Dallas, the group met some girls who also had begun to help with the day camp. LaKeydra Deckard, an eighth grader at O. W. Holmes Middle School, dreams of becoming a pediatrician. Working with NAPS students and with the younger children has "been great," she said. "You love them and you care for them and treat them like they're your kids."

"One of our mottos is 'Children helping children,'" said Cross, the NAPS missions director and a Yuba City, Calif., native. He wants their efforts, especially their outreach to youth, to lead to a decrease in Dallas' teen pregnancy and violence statistics.

"We're hoping that we can meet with the mayor," he said. "Hopefully, we can let the whole city know that we're here and we care."

Some of the volunteers will stay in Dallas. Brown said she will return to college when she finishes up her year. She was attracted to the program when she saw a video about its mission trips. "Then I found out that NAPS even goes out into the schools and into the streets and that really caught my attention because my heart is in the streets," she said. "I used to be out there doing stuff that most young people do."

Although the work NAPS does is unpaid, Cross said, it is worth the sacrifice. In addition to providing the supplies and educational programs, they've been able to give something extra.

"The greatest thing that you can show people is love," he said. "And love is revealed when people make sacrifices. That's just what we do -- show love."

Tiesha Henderson is a Black College Wire summer intern at the Dallas Examiner. Portions of her story first appeared in the Dallas Examiner.

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