The notion of doing good deeds has been around almost as long as humankind itself. But performing charitable acts, fostering civic-mindedness and helping those less fortunate are concepts that don't always come naturally. Nevertheless, there are indications on college campuses nationwide that we are becoming a more benevolent society. In this special section, FOCUS illustrates how Boise State is doing its part to maintain that trend toward goodwill.

# Kindness 101

Students learn by giving of themselves

By Amy Stahl

nce a week, Boise State nursing professor
Joanne Springer holds class in a cramped
office in a downtown homeless shelter. Far
from the hallways of the city's antiseptically clean hospitals, Springer and her
students help desperate patients seeking

free health-care services.

Volunteering at the Community House shelter isn't a requirement of Springer's job — nor is it part of the nursing curriculum. But Springer believes it's worth the time to guide students into volunteer service.

"It's an important thing for faculty to do," she says.

"Once students experience [community service], they feel better about it."

A growing number of Boise State students are catching on. In the last six years, student activists have successfully lobbied for funds to support two new programs — Volunteer Services Board and Service Learning — that link the



university with local non-profit agencies.

The programs are growing in popularity, with about 1,600 students pitching in for VSB programs in 1997-98—nearly triple that of 1994-95. About 100 students have enrolled in Service Learning since its founding in 1996.

Boise State's surge of volunteer activity reflects a national trend. Campus Compact, a network of college and university presidents who have incorporated commu-



The Idaho Food Bank Warehouse was one of several organizations assisted by Boise State faculty, staff and students during the annual Into the Streets project coordinated by the Volunteer Services Board.

nity service into their schools' missions, has grown from four to 565 members in just 14 years.

"We are seeing more and more presidents emphasize the role of community service in their universities. This is especially true of metropolitan universities, where the connection to their communities is strong," says Boise State President Charles Ruch, a member of Campus Compact.

Despite the seemingly rosy picture, some observers wonder whether those who say they volunteer are working in areas where they are most needed.

For example, in a 1997 article in *U.S.*News & World Report, congressional aide
Michael J. Gerson asserts that volunteers
aren't serving where society needs them most
— helping the homeless, family counseling,
tutoring or substance abuse prevention.
Volunteers aren't willing to pledge them-

selves to improve the plight of our most underserved populations, he says.

Boise State history professor Robert Sims also points to some unseen societal tensions that may be undermining volunteer participation. Rather than moving collectively forward, Sims believes that society is becoming more fragmented.

"We tend to regard the primacy of the individual so highly that we're not always attuned to society," says Sims. "People struggle with this notion of balancing altruism with the notion of taking care of No. 1."

Like Springer, Sims feels that higher education has a responsibility to teach students about the importance of community leadership.

"We need to create opportunities for students to serve, to have those experiences," Sims says. "We need to set up circumstances where people develop the habit of serving others."

Education, he says, can help students "understand that there's a way to live one's life besides taking care of oneself. There are other rewards."

Nursing professor Springer adds that the spirit of giving isn't necessarily ingrained in everyone. Generational differences may explain how her students view community service, she says.

"You have to be kind of an old

'60s radical to walk into a place and say: 'What can I do now?' Gen Xers were born in a time of plenty. They weren't essential to the family's survival," she says. "When they get into some projects that are significant, it might be the first time they've really been engaged."

More and more students are discovering the value of that engagement through Boise State's Volunteer Services Board.

Director Toni Lawson reels off a list of student volunteers who work at Community House, Mountain States Refugee Center and the Literacy Lab. Most students, she says, prefer projects with personal interaction.

And she says student volunteers from a variety of majors lead projects — an Easter egg hunt for kids with special needs is coordinated by the Council for Exceptional Students, a reading program for homeless

### STUDENTS FORGO SPRING BREAK TANS TO HELP SEATTLE'S HOMELESS

While some students were working on their tans or racing down ski slopes, a group of Boise State volunteers helped homeless and low-income people in Seattle as part of a new Alternative Spring Break program sponsored by Boise State's Service Learning program and the Volunteer Services Board.

Alternative Spring Break gives students an opportunity to provide community service in an area of need.

The program was created at the request of Boise State students and is modeled after similar spring-break activities sponsored by other campuses around the nation.

About 20 students worked at three Seattle non-profit agencies. At the Northwest Harvest statewide food bank, volunteers sorted food items and served meals. They assisted with cleanup and built a storage area for distributing clothing at the Downtown Emergency Service Center's homeless shelter. And at the Fremont Public Association, volunteers did maintenance and socialized with elderly residents in low-income housing.

The week wasn't all work and no play, says Rose Olson, Service Learning coordinator. Although the volunteers were expected to work full time during the day, evenings were open for sight-seeing, cultural events and other activities. 

□

children is led by the English Majors Association, and a lawn mower safety class is taught by applied technology students.

For most groups, volunteers provide more than an extra pair of hands to work on odd jobs here and there. At the Head Start preschool programs serving Ada and Elmore counties, director Louis Landry depends on unpaid labor to meet his budget. He has put a \$21,000 price tag on the "in-kind" volunteer services he received in 1998 from Boise State students majoring in nursing, social work, accounting, education and business.

In the last year, Boise State students tackled a range of tasks at Head Start. They helped teachers in the classroom, laid bricks for a new walkway, helped families find financial assistance, improved bookkeeping procedures and crafted a new marketing campaign. "They just roll up their sleeves and get into the classroom," Landry says.

But getting them there takes creativity. "People's lives are very busy. If you're going to run a volunteer program, you have to be flexible," says Landry. "If you're not inventive, then you make it hard for people to connect."

"The competition for volunteers is becoming keen," adds Karen Des Aulniers, volunteer programs specialist at Ada County Juvenile Court Services. She searches out volunteers at area corporations and churches as well as at Boise State. Des Aulniers gives frequent presentations and regularly attends the student-sponsored Volunteer Fair in an attempt to lure prospective student volunteers. Recruiting is a major part of her job—and her efforts appear to be paying off.

It takes nearly 250 volunteers to keep Ada County Juvenile Court Services' three major initiatives going. Des Aulniers relies on Boise State students in all three — a one-to-one mentoring program fashioned after Big Brothers/Big Sisters, a Victims First program that pairs trained volunteers with victims of crime, and an intervention program designed to make young, first-time offenders more accountable through meetings with the youths and their parents.

Des Aulniers knows that conflicts prevent some volunteers from making yearlong promises. But she says many of her student volunteers stay on — even after their formal commitments end.

Boise State's faculty has had an important influence on the rise of student volunteerism, says Rose Olson, director of Service Learning, a new program where students receive an additional course credit for performing 40 hours of volunteer work. It is up to the faculty member to include the Service Learning option in a course.

"I have been nothing but impressed since the first day I came to campus. It's a very student-centered faculty. They're very in-



Toni Lawson, left, says the number of students served by the Volunteer Services Board has tripled in three years.

### **BOARD MATCHES STUDENTS TO PROJECTS**

When members of the English Majors Association were looking for a meaningful community service project, where did they turn? To the Volunteer Services Board (VSB), a student-run organization that links Boise State students to local non-profit agencies. Now, thanks to a referral from VSB, the English majors are helping teach homeless people to read through a program offered by Boise's Community House.

Operating out of a busy office on the second floor of the Student Union, VSB coordinates Into the Streets, biannual volunteer fairs, a holiday project, a student recognition ceremony and other special events. VSB also maintains a Self-Referral Center database that enables students to thumb through a thick catalog of more than 100 agencies begging for volunteer assistance.

VSB was founded in 1993 to provide "a different kind of student activity," says Maureen Sigler, Student Union associate director. "Most of the student activities we offered were group oriented. VSB can serve individuals and groups." She says that it also "provides agencies with more continuity and consistency from year to year. But the main purpose was to make it easier for students to volunteer."

In the last six years, volunteering has grown in popularity — both with students and agencies. In 1997-98, VSB linked 1,572 students with volunteer work — nearly triple that of 1994-95. Volunteer activities are coordinated by a part-time student staff member with a student board of directors that receive guidance from a universitywide advisory group.

"Student volunteering provides immeasurable opportunities for all those involved," says Toni Lawson, VSB director. "We all benefit when individuals volunteer time and effort to making our community a better place."

Events coordinated by VSB include:

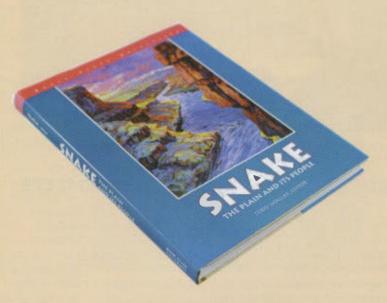
students, faculty and staff last fall. As part of the project, they packaged bulk items at the Idaho Food Bank Warehouse, cleaned up the Association of Retarded Citizens office, washed windows at the WCA, and painted environmentally friendly messages on city storm drains. Participants also washed school buses at Head Start, completed maintenance projects at a neighborhood daycare and played bingo with elderly residents of the Boise Samaritan Village.

**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR./HUMAN RIGHTS CELEBRATION** projects focus on human rights and serving the community. Boise State volunteers have staffed soup kitchens and immunization clinics, collected soaps and shampoos for homeless people and rounded up books for a local alternative high school.

**HOLIDAY PROJECTS** include a "giving tree" with tags listing gift items for area children. Last year, nearly 500 tags were plucked from the tree, and donated gifts were distributed through the Salvation Army.

New this year is a VSB-coordinated Hunger Banquet, a national project focusing on the quantity and quality of meals eaten by homeless and poverty-stricken Americans. Boise State's first Hunger Banquet is planned for April.  $\square$ 

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volved in the community," says Olson. "They want their students to connect with the community, to get real-life experience, to understand the role the community has in their life."

Clearly, students are benefiting from the experience. Social work major Vianey Bruce volunteered at Head Start as a Service Learning project for a psychology class. The mother of a 9-year-old-son — a former Head Start student — Bruce says the experience working in the classroom helped her understand how her parenting skills have improved.

It's one thing to be "book smart" — and another to be able to understand what stage a child is in, she says. "It's wonderful to know that I can help them learn."

As with students, volunteer service also enriches the lives of Boise State faculty. Many are like communication professor Peter Wollheim, who uses volunteerism as an opportunity to reach into the community.

Wollheim has worked in various aspects of suicide prevention for the last 15 years. Most recently, he has led training sessions for about 200 hotline volunteers — many of whom are Boise State students.

It's tough duty. Volunteers take calls at home on six-hour shifts two weeks a month. When a call comes in to the Idaho Suicide Hotline, they have to be ready to delve deeply into their own relationships to help whoever is on the line. "On the hotline you get the most honest conversations of your life," he says. "You wind up using everything you know about yourself and your life."

While he feels an ethical responsibility to engage in community service, Wollheim says his volunteer activities motivate his students. They're intrigued when he talks about hotline conversations in class and the kinds of services needed to help people facing domestic abuse, mental illness, physical challenges and other crises. "Students respond to how public policy decisions have an impact on people's lives," Wollheim says.

Wollheim's personal commitment and his willingness to share his knowledge with student volunteers are what community service is all about, according to Ruch.

"Service ought to be something you start in college and hopefully continue throughout your life," says the Boise State president. "College graduates are still the privileged few in our country who are often looked up to as leaders in the community. Part of their responsibility is to give back and not always take."

When asked why she volunteers to help the homeless and mentally ill, Springer echoes Ruch's sentiments. It sounds corny, she says, "but it's more enjoyable to give rather than receive.

"It's a spiritual belief that we're all in this together. What happens to people in the community affects me."  $\square$