

Program tutors low-income kids

Two alumni help urban students and teachers by giving individual attention to overcrowded classes

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It's not news to hear about low literacy rates in New York. But two Rutgers alumni decided to dedicate 10 months of their lives to work with a relatively new program in the city which helps students in urban schools who have fallen behind.

Both Diana El-Neemany and Alexandra Hernandez, who graduated from Rutgers in 2007, decided to take a year off before applying to graduate school to serve in City Year, a national non-profit organization and become members of the community service network, AmeriCorps.

In New York City, 9-year-olds growing up in low-income communities are already three grade levels behind their high-income peers. Fifty-eight percent of the fourth graders are illiterate and half will not graduate from high school, according to the City Year Web site.

Many teachers are not able to give extra time to students who fall behind in disadvantaged urban schools because most of their classes are overcrowded, Hernandez said. But City Year participants help students to catch up through individual tutoring sessions.

City Year places people ages 17 to 24 in school districts to try and weave changes into impoverished communities, said Recruitment Manager Hollie Rudolph of the program's Philadelphia office. The participants not only tutor children, but also help teachers in the classroom and work on changing the landscape in the surrounding area.

Rudolph said the purpose of City Year is to bring social change in communities. Hernandez said in the morning she tries to make the school look better by creating murals and painting the walls.

"We do a lot of beautifying," El-Neemany said.

El-Neemany also labors in the community parks, in an attempt to make them a better and

cleaner place to be for the young students.

City Year is a national organization founded in 1988 by two students from Harvard Law School, who expressed the desire to bring social change to the nation, Rudolph said. The students were Michael Brown and Alan Khazei, according to the City Year Web site.

Hernandez describes City Year as a challenging experience. But the experience has proved fruitful for the school in which Hernandez works, P.S. 13 on the East side of New York City.

"We have only been at P.S.13 for about a month now, and already there is some change visible in the school," Hernandez said.

P.S. 13 is a new school that opened its doors in September this year. City Year is setting up one-on-one tutoring and a program called "Bringing Books to Life" in the school, where City Year Corps members try to get children interested in books by hosting creative events - they might, for example, put on a play or host arts and crafts sessions, Hernandez said.

Diana El-Neemany has been working with City Year for two months now and serves her time in central Harlem at P.S. 133.

"My work hours are from 8 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., but it is normal for me to work until 8 p.m. some days," El-Neemany said.

El-Neemany not only works in a fourth grade classroom in P.S. 13, but also works with a student on one-on-one tutoring.

"The child I work with is a fourth grader who's reading and writing level on a kindergarten level," she said.

El-Neemany said she has seen improvement in the child already. The child is more confident in class now, and attempts to answer question in class.

"All the students need is a bit of encouragement," El-Neemany said.

City Year started in Boston and has only branched out since 1988. When City Year enters a school, they try to get to the root of the problem and work from there, El-Neemany said.

"City Year has helped me build confidence in myself, it has helped me develop as a leader," El-Neemany said. "It has helped me refine my professionalism, because we do work with corporate America, who sponsor a lot of our programs."