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TrekNorth students shine as volunteers

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By: [Brian Matthews](#), Bemidji Pioneer

BEMIDJI – While the school year is winding down, final exams are being taken and lockers are being cleaned out, TrekNorth Junior & Senior High School students can pat themselves on the back for the more than 2,000 volunteer hours they gave to the Bemidji Community.

“The students are absolutely fantastic,” said Sandi Malterud, manager of Lutheran Social Service Senior Nutrition and Senior Dining at the Paul Bunyan Senior Activity Center. “They are overly enthusiastic and are always happy to interact with the seniors while they work.”

As one of many of the school’s volunteer activities in the community, the students volunteer for the senior meals, setting up tables, serving food and cleaning dishes twice a month.

TrekNorth teacher Erica Harmsen said service learning is one of the three focuses of the school. Each student is required to have three service learning credits, which equates to one year.

Students volunteer for a wide variety of organizations in the community, including Lutheran Social Services, St. Philip’s School, Village of Hope, Neilson Place, Itasca State Park and others.

“I did soup kitchens and homeless shelters because that’s what I thought volunteering was,” senior Brenda Cecena said. “Through the years, volunteering was redefined because we got so many more options, like going to St. Philip’s or helping seniors at Trillium (Memory Care).”

In addition to the service to the Bemidji community, TrekNorth students also have summer service trips to places like Chicago, Pine Ridge, N.D., and Spencer, W. Va.

The weeklong service trips take place in the first week of June, each offering a unique itinerary.

Junior Ariana Kavstens went on the Chicago trip last summer and said it was one of the best experiences she has had.

“It really opened my eyes to all the different types of service learning there was,” Kavstens said. “We went to homeless shelters and schools with underprivileged kids. It was extremely eye-opening.”

Cecena went on the Pine Ridge Trip, a trip that is a bit more hands-on, with students building bunk beds, skirting trailers, building outhouses and learning about the Indian reservation, hearing the reservation members’ stories and learning about their culture.

The Spencer trip is a new venture, where students will be working with farmers, learning about the mountaintops and coal mining.

Service learning may be a requirement for all students, but Harmsen said most students fulfill their requirements long before they graduate and continue to volunteer for the pure enjoyment of it.

“Three credits isn’t a lot — three credits is one year,” Harmsen said. “Many students get their credits in seventh and eighth grade but they continue to sign up and they continue to want to get on service trips. They don’t stop.”

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