

PERSPECTIVE

Call to community service missing in graduation messages

During the past few weeks, many of us have watched with happiness as family members and friends graduated from countless high schools and colleges. Audiences

GUEST COLUMN

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and graduates have listened to speakers delivering messages meant to sum up the educational experience and offer words of inspiration as one door closes and another opens. Having sat through a number of graduation ceremonies on both sides of the aisle, this year's experience was particularly troubling.

While attending a high school graduation at an area suburban school that shall remain nameless (it was not Brookline), I listened to the school's superintendent, principal, class president, salutatorian and valedictorian extol the virtues of the Class of 2006. During the 2 1/2-hour ceremony, not once was the subject of community service raised. It was not discussed as part of the high school experience, nor offered as a career path for the young graduates. Volunteer work was not rewarded in any of the scholarships and awards handed out. The closest reference to service was military service — a noble path, but only the thinnest slice of the world of

community service. I left the ceremony saddened that I had heard the principal encouraging these young adults to "follow your own moral compass" rather than to work towards a goal higher than self-gratification.

As the director of a Brookline-based nonprofit organization, I wondered if the same notion of community service was similarly omitted from other graduations at all levels of education. What lessons of community did the graduates of this particular suburban Massachusetts school learn during their past four years? Are graduates of other schools being encouraged to pursue their own goals while forgetting that we are part of a community that needs caring and tending?

My own experience has brought me into contact with volunteers who learned the importance of volunteering from their parents or family members. Parents who volunteer tend to raise children who also volunteer. But what about those children who have parents who have not experienced or encouraged community service? Parents may feel that it is in their children's best interests to have them play sports or take music lessons rather than volunteer at a local nursing home or nonprofit organization. Each such decision is a trade-off in a world of choices.

What role does education play in fostering community service? In working with the Lawrence School second-grade classes of Jill Puleo and Marie Leman, I



Lawrence School second-grade students held a bake sale to raise money to send items to an orphanage in Lesotho in southern Africa. Here, second-grade teacher Marie Leman with students Brianna Rutty, left, Isabela Schettino, right and Hanna Polyak, far right. Jill Puleo's second-grade class also pitched in. In addition to the bake sale, the students painted cheerful pictures for the children in Lesotho.

have seen a wonderful example of opening the world to children. After reading about the work our organization is doing providing medicines to children at orphanages in Lesotho, southern Africa, Puleo contacted me and asked if there was something the children in her second-grade class could do to help. Knowing how drab the walls are at the Maseru Children's Village, the students were asked to paint cheerful pictures.

Marie Leman's second-grade class joined in. The children met the assignment with enthusiasm and after learning about Lesotho, painted bright, colorful paintings of happy subjects like flowers, rainbows and animals. But the children wanted to do more.

The children wanted to gather small items to send to one of the orphanages, the Maseru Children's Village. I explained that it is very expensive to ship items to

Lesotho and that it is easier to send money to Lesotho and have the items purchased there. Puleo and Leman decided that it would be a wonderful opportunity to teach children about volunteering. Both classes held a bake sale to raise money to send items to the orphanage. The children have filled a backpack with toothbrushes, Band-Aids, Magic Markers and the like which is ready to be sent to Lesotho with

the money raised from the bake sale.

Asked about what the children learned from this experience, they responded with clarity and generosity that sometimes gets lost in the rush of the adult world. Here are a few of their words of wisdom:

"It is important to help others," Francesca Caramazza said.

"Africa is important, even though we have more," June Sass said.

"Africa is not like in outer space, it is our community," Michiki Akioka said.

In working with these children and teachers, I have learned a few lessons myself. First, the Brookline school system is fortunate to have teachers who believe that community service is an integral part of education and deliver the lesson that volunteering is fun yet valued work. Second, parents have been supportive of the team effort between the school and our organization, reinforcing the message that doing for others is important.

And finally, this time next year, I would like to have one of our now third-graders speak at Brookline High School's graduation and talk about volunteering.

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