Rutgers AmeriCorps Program Improves Lives & Strengthens Communities

By Margaret McHugh

Mike Pilet recognized the mother’s look of embarrassment as she entered a neighborhood center in Newark to get help applying for food stamps.

Pilet, 25, had experienced some lean times growing up in Irvington when his mother struggled to provide meals for him and his three brothers because her meager paycheck had to cover the rent first.

He smiled and spoke gently to the woman to put her at ease, he recalled. “I’m definitely understanding,” said Pilet, a member of the first AmeriCorps program at Rutgers University. “When you can barely feed your kids, that’s when they get in trouble. That opens the door to other problems.”


AmeriCorps members (they’re not called volunteers as in the Peace Corps) serve throughout the state in support of the missions of T.E.E.M. Gateway and the University’s Urban Extension to better the lives of children and families. Pilet and 24 other New Jerseyans were chosen from among more than 150 applicants, said Sara Naphas, who runs T.E.E.M. Gateway’s AmeriCorps program. Nationwide, more than 540,000 people have served in AmeriCorps since its start in 1994.

Locally, Rutgers T.E.E.M. Gateway AmeriCorps members are helping at-risk and disconnected youth engage in meaningful employment, education and service opportunities to encourage positive life choices. This is accomplished through mentoring programs, tutoring, school enrichment programs, and by supporting community nonprofit organizations. Pilet serves at one of 12 Family Success Centers operated by the nonprofit Newark Now, helping clients fill out paperwork for government assistance, scheduling appointments for them and following up to make sure they’ve received help. Newark Now was founded by the current mayor of Newark, Cory A. Booker, and serves residents in a variety of other ways, from community events to assistance with tax preparation.

“I feel good about what I’m doing,” Pilet said. “I feel more connected to the community because I’m making a difference in people’s lives.”
When Pilet struggled through troubled years as a teenager in Irvington, Rutgers T.E.E.M. Gateway connected him to a strong support system, guided him through an employment search and interviews and helped him apply to Essex Community College. “They were there to help me out a lot,” Pilet said. He has since enrolled at Rutgers Newark and intends to use a $2,363 AmeriCorps education award towards the completion of his degree in management and economics.

Rutgers AmeriCorps members include former T.E.E.M. Gateway clients, college students, recent graduates, retirees and other adults, Naphas said. All serve at-risk communities, from Newark to Camden to Asbury Park. The program partners with youth development and prevention programs, and works closely with the Juvenile Justice Commission in the recruitment and placement of members.

Leniah Johnson of Seaside Heights, is also a Rutgers T.E.E.M. Gateway AmeriCorps member. He is using his talent as a poet and spoken word artist in an enrichment program at Asbury Park High School, teaching students new ways to express themselves.

“‘I’m basically trying to get them to let loose with their hearts and their minds,’” said Johnson, 35. Asbury Park High is a tough place to grow up, he said. “Knowing they can write how they feel and get their frustrations down on paper gives them an outlet. I tell them, ‘don’t worry about anyone judging it.’”

Six other AmeriCorps members serve with Rutgers Cooperative Extension’s county offices. They coordinate, enhance and teach after-school workshops about health, nutrition, science, engineering and technology. They also identify new schools with which the Cooperative Extension office can partner to offer workshops.

Elsewhere, Rutgers AmeriCorps members:

- Recruit volunteers to mentor at-risk students for the Communities in Schools of New Jersey Mentoring Success Center.
- Tutor students and organize enrichment programs with the I Have a Dream Program at Newark’s Burnet Street Elementary School. The Program “adopted” a class – now in the 4th grade – and will provide support and future scholarships to help them pursue higher education.
- Educate students and communities through organizations like Newark’s Youth Education and Employment Success (YE²S) Center in financial literacy, job skills training, creative expression through music and even the art of cooking.

T.E.E.M. Gateway AmeriCorps’ goals are to improve the lives of children, engage the community and, most importantly, help members gain skills to prepare them for life after their year of service, Naphas.
said. With that in mind, members receive training in time and money management, professional etiquette, and career preparation. The benefits to both the individual and society are even greater; a recent 8 year study showed that compared to others, AmeriCorps alumni are more empowered to work for the betterment of their communities and more likely to go into public service careers even years after their service.

“Our best successes come when we enable our members to serve their community with the talents and energy they already have,” Naphas said. Through AmeriCorps, members expand not only their knowledge but their possibilities in life, and they become examples of success. “By virtue of their service, they are empowering those they help to grow and then give back to their community.”

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AmeriCorps Member Benefits:

- Full-time members work 1,700 hours (typically 35 hours per week) and get $11,400 in living expenses during the year and an education award of $4,725 when they complete the program.
- Part-time members work 900 hours (typically 20 hours per week) and get $6,000 in living expenses during the year and an education award of $2,363 when they complete the program.
- Health coverage and training are also provided, and full-time members are also eligible for childcare assistance.

Applications are being accepted for half-time positions with the Rutgers T.E.E.M. Gateway AmeriCorps Program until April; applications for both full- and half-time members may also be considered for the upcoming program year, which will launch in September 2010. Apply online at: http://www.americorps.gov/