

Philanthropy Is A 'Gobbledygook' Word For Goodness

Dorothy A. Johnson has worn many hats in the name of philanthropy.

Her latest efforts are helping shape the future through philanthropy education and service learning programs which are being taught in classrooms throughout Michigan.

Johnson — known by friends and colleagues as "Dottie" — is co-chair for the Learning to Give National Board, an organization that teaches about giving, serving and private citizen action for the common good, and encourages academic service learning at elementary, middle and high school levels.

"Learning to Give provides knowledge about giving and service, and pairs this new understanding with the action of service-learning," Johnson says. "It's about giving of yourself and your time, resources and treasure and understanding why these contributions are so crucial to the greater community."

The Learning to Give program began in Michigan in 1997. The College of Education at Grand Valley State University joined Learning to Give as a partner in 2003 and is mentoring schools in several West Michigan districts. In July, GVSU hosted more than 80 educators at the inaugural Learning to Give-Michigan Summer Institute.

"We are very pleased to be associated with GVSU and the College of Education," Johnson said. "One of our tenets is that if you want to effect change, you need to do it in the educational system. And you need to provide creative, ready-to-use tools that assist teachers in their curriculum development."

Aspects of academic service-learning have been incorporated in teaching units being piloted in 30 Learning to Give schools throughout the state. As part of the program, GVSU's College of Education has partnered with several school districts in West Michigan — including Forest Hills, Allendale, Grand Rapids, Spring Lake and the Grand Rapids Catholic Diocese — to provide support, expertise and resources to teachers and schools. The goal is to encourage young people to take positive action in their own lives, become involved in community initiatives, understand their ownership in a democratic society and aspire to promote overall good character in their deeds and way of life.

"With Learning to Give, we are teaching social studies and history while highlighting the important role of the nonprofit sector and the significance of giving and serving," Johnson said. "Service-learning becomes the application of the concepts. A student may go to a soup kitchen or community event and experience giving and serving with a deeper understanding of its meaning to our country."

Johnson insists that the importance of incorporating philanthropic knowledge into the educational process is invaluable. Like the concept



"Dottie" Johnson is impressed by the efforts of students at Northern Hills Middle School, who "Lead the Way" out into the community.

of character education, Learning to Give lessons that are incorporated into everyday classroom teaching help promote a better society.

"With some families, giving and service are part of the families' values and it's not an issue," Johnson said. "But in many others, for whatever reasons, the concepts are not addressed. Even if they are addressed, schools and caring adults need to reinforce them."

Some schools have implemented service-learning as a required part of the curriculum. Although those requirements can be cause for debate, Johnson said she believes the positive results outweigh the controversy.

"When you say you are requiring volunteerism, it is an oxymoron," she said. "But schools that have service requirements have had terrific results. One outcome is the creation of a kinder classroom. We have learned that students in Learning to Give classrooms are nicer to each other based on new understanding and experience."

As part of the program, student volunteers conduct canned food drives, volunteer their time and services, and bring other service based initiatives out into the community.

Student volunteers at Northern Hills Middle School have formed a "Lead the Way" model. Most of the students participating did not realize they were part of a pilot program. Instead, they eagerly take part in charitable fund-raising, food-raising and house-raising causes for agencies such as God's Kitchen, Harvest Gleaners,

Habitat for Humanity and The Image as they raise awareness of philanthropic values at school and home by giving back to the community.

"Philanthropy is a big gobbledygook word," Johnson says. "It simply means giving of yourself, your time, your talent, and treasure or money."

"In school, we are trying to teach sharing and concern for the greater good for the largest number and how we can all play a part."

Johnson served as founding President and CEO of the Council of Michigan Foundation for more than 25 years before moving on to other responsibilities in 1999. She is an active participant on the boards of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Grand Valley State University and the Corporation for National and Community Service, among others.

"I never use the word 'retire,'" Johnson said. "I use the word 'graduate' for taking on new challenges."

As co-chair of the Learning to Give National Board, Johnson continues her mission of instilling philanthropic values at a grassroots level.

"In my opinion, it is absolutely crucial, because young people learn how to give of themselves, of their time and of their resources," Johnson said. "A side benefit, of course, is the strengthening of our civil society."

"It starts with one person. What children learn in their homes, schools, churches and community groups are crucial to the future for all of us."

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