

Helping Victims of Hurricane Mitch

By Madeline Yates

The 7th and 8th grade students on the Quest Team at Eastern Middle School took an elective class on service-learning through which they raised materials and money (indirect service) to benefit people who had been affected by Hurricane Mitch. We specifically worked with a sister-city organization, Project Gettysburg Leon, which had a 15+-year history linking citizens of the US with people in Nicaragua. The Eastern students studied about contemporary Latin American issues and learned about the difference between humanitarian aid and long-term development (prevention). They studied global economics and socio-economic status, and they learned specifically about the methodology of service-learning which includes preparation, action, and reflection. The students finally taught other students in classes around their school about the underlying causes of the devastation of the hurricane and advocated help for the Central American residents who were set back 30 years economically. (Poverty and the economics of underdevelopment are underlying causes of the gross devastation; if Hurricane Mitch had hit Florida, not Central America, estimates are that 100 people would have died, not 1100.) More than five packed carloads of clothing and supplies were gathered, and over \$1000 in donations were raised by Eastern Middle School students. More importantly, many students came to better understand how their own lives and lifestyles affect people in other countries, and how they are really capable of having a positive impact on many people's lives.

Best practices:

The students chose to respond to the need of the Hurricane Mitch survivors because it was a clear, real need. However, knowing there is a general need (for "things") is different from knowing the specific needs of people in Nicaragua, so the students wrote an email to the coordinator of Project Gettysburg Leon (in Nicaragua) to find out what the most pressing real needs were. The students then posted this list on email so faculty could tell their classes what items to bring in. (Example, summer, not winter clothes. Bandages, but not medicine.) 7th and 8th grade social studies in Montgomery County focused on world cultures. As part of the world cultures curriculum students are to learn about the connections between various countries: economically, politically, historically, and culturally. Specifically the 8th grade curriculum includes a focus on Latin America. Thus, it was very fitting that the students learned about the history of Central America and how U.S. fast food companies use meat from cattle raised in Central America - which reside in the desirable low-land agricultural regions, which poorer people are forced to live on the less desirable hillsides. When the hurricane came, the infrastructure of poverty (non-reinforced buildings) and deforestation of the hills contributed to the massive mudslides, which killed many people.

The students did written warm-ups at the start of every period, which led their questioning from facts, to higher-order thinking, to personal reflection on an issue. The students reflected verbally on their group process in deciding on a project, and did a personal paper-reflection at the completion of the unit.

Students formed committees to accomplish various parts of the project. Some students trained, and then educated their peers by speaking to other classes about these issues. Some students prepared PSA's for the morning announcements. During a fundraising car wash, some students were responsible for a) collecting funds raised b) bringing in supplies needed c) monitoring other students during the car wash. All students were supposed to become spokespeople and advocates, able to explain the purpose of the project.

In order to ship the materials collected and funds raised to Nicaragua, we worked with a local community based organization: Project Gettysburg Leon (a sister city organization). Even though the immediate need for hurricane relief has subsided, this non-profit organization continues to provide support for Nicaragua. They are also a conduit for paintings done by students and artists in Nicaragua.

Prior to the beginning of the course, the faculty got together to plan for the spring semester. The students also actively planned their material aid drives and the fund- raising car wash. They made lists of things to do and time-lines in which to accomplish them.

Not only did students really study the underlying structural issues involved in the devastation of the hurricane and current economic conditions in Nicaragua, they also had several guest speakers come talk to them about philanthropy and social justice. Older students from local high schools who had been honored for their involvement in service also came to speak to our students about the graduation requirement, and the importance of preparation, action and reflection. Students who had never previously organized a fund-raising campaign even learned the technical details of advertising and getting needed permission and training to do a major car wash. Students reflected on when they themselves were the recipients of service, and what service they hoped to offer others in the future.

