

# Selfless Service

*College of Agriculture Students volunteer with organizations*

By Lacey Altwegg

It's easy for students to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of college life. Between running to class, work or club meetings, students often wish for more time in a day. But for two College of Agriculture students, time is the most important thing they give.

Volunteering can be a difficult task to achieve. However, these students make volunteering a priority. Whether it is for the rewarding experience or need to help others, each student has personal reasons to give back.

## Big Lakes

Agricultural business student Maggie Thompson decided the Big Lakes program was the perfect place to focus volunteer efforts.

The Big Lakes center is located in Manhattan and serves adults and children with special needs. Big Lakes' mission is to provide quality services and programs to promote independence, productivity, integration and inclusion into the community for persons with developmental disabilities.

Since the Big Lakes program started in 1975, Richard Mattson, professor of horticulture therapy, has been involved. Mattson served on a committee to help build the relationship between Big Lakes and K-State. One starter office has expanded into a four-county program with group homes throughout Manhattan.

Big Lakes participants visit the K-State greenhouses twice a week for activities that range from transplanting plants to helping with the plant sales. Mattson says the greenhouse offers a therapeutic atmosphere where the participants can

*"It is never a negative experience if you are volunteering."*

—Maggie Thompson, shown helping transplant coleus with a Big Lakes participant

increase learning skills and interact with K-State students.

Thompson first heard about the Big Lakes program during her Horticulture 256 class. Mattson offered the volunteer opportunity to students for extra credit. Thompson says she first attended for the extra points, but has since gained worthy experience and knowledge.

"You can only volunteer a total of four times throughout the semester for the extra credit, but I am going to help more than that because it's so rewarding," Thompson says. "When they remember my name and smile every time I volunteer, it makes it all worth it."

## Reaching Out

On her first day of volunteering, it was difficult for Thompson to step out of her comfort zone. At first, she didn't know how to jump in and help the participants. But after spending more time with them, Thompson learned the routine.

"Getting to interact with the participants and learn about their lives is my favorite part about volunteering," Thompson says. "They are always helping each other and treating everyone with respect, which is a lesson a lot of us could to learn from."

Mattson helps supervise the activities with the Big Lakes participants and says it's students like Thompson that make the program a success.

"It's a special experience for the students who volunteer. It's neat to see them and the Big Lakes participants learn from each other and build a relationship," Mattson says. "Students can see the participants grow and learn in the course of the semester and it's rewarding to know they were a part of that growth."

Thompson has found that working with Big Lakes reduces her stress and enables her to keep her priorities in check. She believes more students need to make time to volunteer and have an open mind when doing it.

"When I went into the greenhouse for the first time to volunteer with Big Lakes, I had an amazing experience," Thompson says. I came to understand that it is never going to be a negative experience if you are volunteering your time to help someone."

It takes initiative to want to volunteer. Many students find that initiative within their organizations. However, for this next

volunteer, all it took was a personal choice to want to make a difference in a person's life.

## Hope Ranch

Horses, fresh air and working with kids are what pulled agricultural communications and journalism student Becky Sullivan to volunteering with the Hope Ranch organization.

Hope Ranch is located just outside of Manhattan. It is a non-profit therapeutic riding center, which uses horses and horse-



*Alex Thomas, Hope Ranch student and Becky Sullivan, volunteer, enjoy the ride.*

oriented activities to provide therapy, education, sport and recreational activities for individuals with physical, emotional and developmental challenges as well as children considered to be at-risk.

Sullivan first heard about Hope Ranch through an email. She had read that for the first time ever, Hope Ranch had to turn down a child because they didn't have enough volunteers, so she decided it was time to step up and make a difference.

"I am passionate about horses and I love working with students. I had never worked with special-needs students, so I thought it would be a cool way to do both," Sullivan says.

## Making an Impact

Sullivan believes Hope Ranch is a wonderful opportunity for volunteers to

experience working with a diverse group of people. Every Monday night, Sullivan is a horse leader. She gets a horse ready to ride and makes sure the horse stays calm during a student's lesson.

"It's not a glamorous job. I am out there in jeans and a t-shirt, but it is so much fun and the intrinsic reward I get is worth every minute. I encourage anyone who wants to volunteer to try it. Making connections with the student is the most powerful part," Sullivan says.

According to board president, Ken Scroggs, volunteers are a huge part of Hope Ranch's success.

Sixty to 70 percent of the volunteers are K-State students. He believes the volunteers are learning just as much or more than the kids taking the lessons.

"A lot of the volunteers leave here saying, 'this has helped me more than I have helped the kids'. It brings about a good sense of well-being," Scroggs says. "We just provide the atmosphere."

## Why Volunteer

For Sullivan, it was a personal moment that made her realize exactly why she decided to volunteer. She doesn't get paid or need the volunteer hours, but getting students to forget about worries is the only reason she needs.

"The students don't always realize how difficult they might have it, but the parents do realize. When I see the student's parents happy to see their child smile and forget about their worries it is very touching," Sullivan says. "I always thought about the kids, but witnessing the parents' happiness is a new experience for me."

Hope Ranch and Big Lakes are always looking for more volunteers.

According to Sullivan, there is always time to volunteer, students just have to make that time and find what they like to do and where their skills can be used for others.

"The older I have gotten, the more I have realized what is really important, and as students, there comes a time to ask yourself how do you really want to spend your time," Sullivan says. "Giving back is so important, and I am so glad I found a way to give my time with Hope Ranch." 🐾