

Nominate an Innovation: Champions of Caring

Amy Cunningham, Emily Allen, and Alina Lucila-Osmunson 04 August 2010

Summary

Champions of Caring is rooted in the lessons of the Holocaust and in the passion of founder Barbara Shaiman, daughter of Holocaust survivors, who was determined that such atrocities never occur again. Since 1995, Champions of Caring has provided character education and service-learning opportunities to over 10,000 diverse youth in the Philadelphia area and beyond. The Champions of Caring Recognition Program identifies and recognizes student service leaders in the Philadelphia area. Through the Journey of a Champion program, Champions of Caring staff provide professional development, curricular materials, and technical support to help educators and administrators integrate character education and service-learning in both the classroom and after-school clubs. Finally, the Ambassadors of Caring Leadership Program provides Champions with sustained mentoring in service and leadership development.

The Problem: A Need for Character Education and Service-Learning

Along with families, educators play a key role in children's ethical development, and the notion of incorporating ethics into American education is not new. In the 1840s, education reform advocate Horace Mann argued that moral development was as important as academic development (U.S. Department of Education 2005).

According to Character Education Partnerships, "character education" teaches and models universal values such as respect and empathy. Such programs not only help children understand the meanings of these values, but also engage "the head, heart and hand," teaching children to care about others and think about the consequences of their actions and behaviors (2010). Service-learning similarly engages "the head, heart and hand" by combining community service with classroom learning and student reflection (Learn and Serve America 2008). The National Youth Leadership Council explains, "Picking up trash by a riverbank is service. Studying water samples under a microscope is learning. When students collect and analyze water samples and the local pollution control agency uses the findings to clean up a river . . . that is service-learning" (2010).

Since the 1970s and '80s, interest in implementing character education and service-learning curricula in schools has increased. Although the principles for successful practice are too numerous to list here, effective character education and service-learning programs share several commonalities: they are

integrated into the curricula (not “add-ons”); they go beyond teaching knowledge to developing positive attitudes and social skills; and teachers and other adults serve as role models demonstrating the desired attitudes and skills. Numerous studies show the benefits of well-designed curricula, including improved academic engagement and performance and increased prosocial behaviors such as empathy and an interest in solving societal problems (National Service-Learning Partnership 2007). However, the need still exists to disseminate proven programs. In particular, there is a need to publicize effective combinations of character education and service-learning, which naturally complement one another (Swick et al. 2000).

The Solution: Champions of Caring

About 15 years ago Barbara Shaiman accompanied her mother Carola Greenspan to Auschwitz, where Carola had been imprisoned during World War II (she became the sole survivor of a family of 65). Shaiman’s father had worked for Oskar Schindler, the man who inspired the Spielberg film *Schindler’s List*. During the trip to Auschwitz, Shaiman approached a group of children behaving disrespectfully, completely removed from the atrocities that had occurred there. Upset by both the silence and indifference during the Holocaust and these boys’ lack of knowledge and empathy, she decided to found an organization that would teach young people to

speak out against injustice and reduce racism, bigotry, and indifference.

Shaiman returned to Philadelphia and began her work with the Champions of Caring Recognition Program, identifying and recognizing student service leaders in the Philadelphia area. To find these leaders, she reached out to Mayor Ed Rendell, School Superintendent David Hornbeck, and Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, the Archbishop of Philadelphia. With their help, she contacted Philadelphia-area schools and encouraged students to apply for recognition as Champions of Caring. To achieve that distinction, students were required to complete an application reflecting on their service work to date, how they effected social change, and how they grew as leaders. Champions even earned the support of Spielberg, who provided verbal encouragement through the nonprofit's tagline — "for the heroes of our time" — and later, financial support.

After several years, Shaiman realized that she needed to reach students who might not yet be engaged in solving societal challenges. To do so, she worked with an educational team from the School District of Philadelphia, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Service Learning Alliance, and specialists in the areas of multicultural education, history, and English to develop a curriculum. Through the Journey of a Champion program, Champions of Caring staff provide professional development, curricular materials, and technical support

to help educators and administrators integrate character education and service-learning in both the classroom and after-school clubs. The curriculum combines academic rigor with cross-disciplinary lessons to promote caring and reduce prejudice among high school and middle school students. It encourages students to create "Cultures of Caring" in their schools by being champions, which the program defines as those who recognize injustice, speak up when they see it, and use their passion and skills to address societal needs, locally and globally.

The third major effort of Champions of Caring, the Ambassadors of Caring Leadership Program, began when Champions honorees voiced a desire for sustained mentoring in service and leadership development. Students recognized as Champions can participate in this year-long program, gaining training in public speaking, leadership, and service project creation. In 2009, one Ambassador of Caring whose parents survived the Cambodian genocide created a project to build an eco-friendly computer technology lab at a rural Cambodian school; others raised awareness of the atrocities in Darfur, provided support for resettling refugees, and reduced prejudice and built relationships between Caucasian senior citizens and Hispanic youth.

How Champions of Caring Is Innovative

While many character education and service-learning

program exist, several characteristics make Champions of Caring an innovative program:

- Champions of Caring combines character education and service-learning.
- Its programs are uniquely rooted in the lessons of the Holocaust and genocide, but also look at issues of hatred, violence, and injustice throughout history and current times.
- Champions of Caring engages students of varied backgrounds from the Philadelphia area with participation in a "continuum of service," by providing curricular materials, offering leadership and service development, and honoring students' service.
- The organization has assembled an extensive list of community partners, including college students from the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, and Drexel University who serve as role models in Champions of Caring programs.
 - Several features ensure sustainability of their programs. For instance, the Ambassadors of Caring design their projects to be sustainable after they conclude the program. They must also recruit two other students to be Champions of Caring, thereby introducing other students to the organization and empowering them to pursue further service.

Impact

Since its founding 15 years ago, Champions of Caring has grown to involve students from 140 schools in the Greater Philadelphia area. To date, 7,500 students have completed the Journey of a Champion curriculum. The Champions of Caring Recognition Program has honored over 2,700 area high-school students, 250 of whom have become Ambassadors of Caring. Students in these three programs have given over one million hours of service to the region.

Research has demonstrated the short- and long-term effects of Champions of Caring. An independent evaluator found that students who completed the Journey of a Champion score higher on measures of pro-social behaviors such as altruism, respect, caring, and conflict resolution, have better attendance, and get into fewer fights than their peers. A study of Champions of Caring alumni found that ten years later, 88 percent continue to be involved in service. Additionally, 53 percent of alumni enter service-related careers, such as Terrell McCray, who founded an organization to mentor boys without father figures (Champions of Caring 2008).

The Journey of a Champion curriculum is updated yearly with the help of Journey teachers. The curriculum has been taught successfully at schools in Philadelphia and Lancaster. It has also been adapted for special needs groups, and is currently being piloted with autistic teens. The curriculum is ready for further dissemination.

Next Steps

Champions of Caring proves the power of one individual to inspire and empower others to recognize injustice and address societal challenges. The organization has engaged over 10,000 students and demonstrates both short- and long-term positive impact. Despite difficult economic times, Shaiman and Executive Director Brianne Tangney have expanded their services and kept overhead low by engaging a team of community partners, consultants, and volunteers. Shaiman is currently focused on creating greater program reach and impact, along with ensuring sustainability. In addition, she is taking her message to adults, recently publishing *Live Your Legacy Now!: Ten Simple Steps to Find Your Passion and Change the World*. The book teaches readers of all ages how to take their passions, interests, and skills to create projects for personal growth and social change, and how to empower others to become new "heroes of our time."

References

Champions of Caring. (2008). Meet Our Alumni.

Champions of Caring, available

at <http://www.championsofcaring.org/content/alumni/alumni.shtml>.

Character Education Partnerships. (2010). Frequently Asked Questions about Character Education, available

at <http://www.character.org/frequentlyaskedquestionsabo>

[utcharactereducation](#).

Learn and Serve America. (2008). Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, available at http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/faqs/index.php.

National Service-Learning Partnership. (2007). About Service-Learning, available at <http://www.nylc.org/discover.cfm?oid=3152&null=1263609568372>.

National Youth Leadership Council. (2010). What Is Service-Learning? available at <http://www.nylc.org/discover.cfm?oid=3152&null=1263609568372>.

Swick, K. J., et al. (2000). *Service Learning and Character Education: Walking the Talk*. South Carolina Department of Education in partnership with the National Dropout Prevention Center.

U.S. Department of Education. (2010). Character Education...Our Shared Responsibility, available at <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/character/brochure.html>

.