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THE NEEDIEST CASES

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Volunteering Time and Clicks to Bridge Generations

By Mathew R. Warren

Last month, in a computer lab at Baruch College in Manhattan, a group of high school students became teachers for a morning. Their pupils were adults hungry to learn about Gmail, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.



Ángel Franco/The New York Times
Mohamed Sall helped Jeanne
Pearson-Gray with Facebook.

“I’m going to get on Facebook,” Jeanne Pearson-Gray, 65, said excitedly as Mohamed Sall, 16, stood over her shoulder with his hand on the computer mouse.

A junior at Baruch College Campus High School, Mohamed guided her step by step through the Web site. Ms. Pearson-Gray, a resident of Harlem and a counselor for a program that assists low-income students at the colleges of the City University of New York, said she was thrilled to finally get caught up on social media.

“There are about 100 people that want to contact me,” she said. “Friends, family, former students, they’ve all been asking me to join Facebook.”

Mohamed, who lives on Roosevelt Island, was a volunteer, along with other members of the National Honor Society at his school, in a workshop called Closing the Technology Gap. It was organized in part by the [Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

In sharing his Internet know-how, Mohamed said he understood that what might seem basic to him might be harder to grasp for someone who had not grown up with the technology.

The workshop was one of a series of projects that resulted from the fund’s partnering with [NYC Service](#), a city-run program that promotes volunteerism.

To commemorate the [Neediest Cases Fund](#)’s 100th anniversary, the seven agencies supported by the fund teamed up with Service in Schools, an initiative led by NYC Service and the city’s Education Department. The objective was to mobilize students from 18 high schools across the city to provide community services and inspire others.

Some of the projects focused on communicating across the generations and getting New Yorkers to share the stories of their lives. Students from the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice, a high school in Brooklyn, met in December with adult clients of [Brooklyn Community Services](#) who struggled with emotional and mental health issues and received services from the agency. The students made audio recordings of their interviews, which they used in multimedia presentations shown in a celebration later that month.

“I guarantee you this conversation right here is going to stick in your brain,” Jerome Jackson said as he sat at a table with two students. He said he had “been around the block a few times.”

“I’m 46 years old, 14 years off crack cocaine,” he said.

Mr. Jackson, a drummer who lives in a homeless shelter in Brooklyn, told the students about his struggles with addiction and bipolar disorder. He spoke of the strength that his faith in God and his recent thirst for knowledge had given him.

“The older you get, the wiser you’re going to get,” he said.

Julian Jimenez, a student who interviewed Mr. Jackson, said he was so impressed that he exchanged contact information with him.

“The stories he told were uplifting,” said Julian, 15, a sophomore from Williamsburg, Brooklyn. “He taught me a lot of things. Today was an inspirational day.”

For another project in December, students from the School for Legal Studies in Brooklyn volunteered at a Christmas toy distribution drive for struggling families at a [Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens](#) community center in Astoria, Queens. That evening, about 300 families lined up to receive gifts and take pictures with Santa Claus.

“Seeing the kids’ reactions to Santa, they remind me of how I was when I was little,” said Brian Vazquez, 17, a junior from Bushwick, Brooklyn, who helped give out stuffed animals to children after they sat on Santa’s lap. “Handing them the toys makes me feel happy.”

Andrew Mitchell watched as his 6-year-old daughter picked out a green teddy bear and his 5-year-old son chose a blue-and-yellow stuffed lizard with Brian’s help.

“That’s a beautiful thing to volunteer their time,” said Mr. Mitchell, 30, an unemployed construction worker from Corona, Queens. “We fell on hard times, and this year has been really hard for us. Today is probably going to be my children’s best day.”

Saisha Ryan, 16, a junior from East New York, Brooklyn, said she liked volunteering because it forced her to interact with strangers. “I’m a little shy,” she said. “It brings me out of my shell because I have to talk to the families.”

The sense of fulfillment, and of having gained something invaluable from the experience, was common among the students.

After being thanked by Ms. Pearson-Gray for his patience showing her the ropes on Facebook, Mohamed said, “I learned a lot about myself while teaching.”

He added, “I’m going to be that age one day, and I’d like people to help me then.”