

## **VOLUNTEERISM - City Hall summer offers teens new skills and service to others**

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- Author/Byline: Melody Gutierrez; mgutierrez@sacbee.com
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Newspaper and limited tape were provided, a task clearly laid out. Build a 2-foot-tall tower, the teacher said. The structure must be able to be transported and support 2 pounds.

The clock was ticking.

Christina Keller had been given deadline and team building assignments like this in the past. But, the Meadowview teen said, this time it was different. She is different.

"That's when I found out that even though life is stressful and there are distractions, I built that tower," Keller said. "And I realized I can make it."

Every teacher strives for this kind of epiphany, where a student suddenly sees the embedded metaphor of limited tape representing money.

It's the kind of realization Keller and other students said they had during Summer at City Hall, a program launched in June that introduced 32 teens to city government, taught them communications skills and showed them the value of volunteering.

Councilman Jay Schenirer and his wife, Bina Lefkovitz, created the program, calling it a model partnership between City Hall and the Sacramento City Unified School District.

The school district provided grant funding to pay teacher John Fox and provide \$300 stipends to the students, many of whom came from Sacramento's roughest neighborhoods. Many of the teens were not honor students. Some had children. Most rose early to catch light rail.

"We want to build on this next year," Schenirer said. "I'd like to see the program double in size. It's just too important."

The teens graduated from the program Wednesday in a two-hour ceremony in the City Council chambers, where the students gave presentations on issues affecting their communities -- high dropout rates, gang violence, drug and alcohol use and a lack of after school and internship programs.

Today, the students will showcase their program at Sacramento City Unified's Summer of Service event from 9 a.m. to noon at John F. Kennedy High School. The event includes more than 800 Sacramento students who completed summer service projects.

Students in Summer at City Hall interned at the animal shelter, the Convention Center, the City Attorney's Office and other departments. Some complained in the mornings, when Fox met with students from 9 a.m. to noon, saying that filing paper was boring or that picking up dog poop was gross.

Fox encouraged them to identify the positives of the experience.

"I really like the people and the animals," said Francisco Sanchez, 17, who attends Luther Burbank High School.

Managers supervising various teens raved about their work earlier this week as Fox visited each of the students at their internships.

"They worked like they were being paid," said Peter Martin, an animal care technician at the City's animal shelter on Front Street. Martin pointed to shiny food bowls, all neatly stacked, saying three interns were able to help the short-staffed facility by cleaning a tower of dirty dishes.

"They looked for things to do," Martin said. "For some kids who come in here, they act like this is a playground. (These interns) actually worked."

At Wednesday's graduation, students thanked everyone involved in creating and administering the program, such as Vincene Jones, the director of the City's Neighborhood Services Division. Without the program, many students said they would probably have spent their summer watching television at home.

"My mom and dad are very proud of me," said Keller, who interned in Schenirer's office. "My sister wants to do the program next year."

Keller said she's setting goals, abandoning low expectations. She was planning on getting her GED instead of finishing her senior year at American Legion.

"This has encouraged me to stay in school and finish," Keller said. "This has changed my whole life."

Keller marvels at how much she's changed. In eighth and ninth grades, she said, she would ditch school, run away from home and had an "overage boyfriend."

"I drank at school, I affiliated with gang members, I was sort of a bully," she said. "I made very bad decisions."

Keller's transformation began her sophomore year with the help of a mentor at Laguna Creek High in Elk Grove, who encouraged her to join the Black Student Union. Then a house fire last year set her back emotionally and further back in school credits. After the fire, she moved to Meadowview and enrolled at American Legion.

That's where she met a teacher named Mr. Fox, who told her about a program he was running called Summer of Service.

"I want to be the first in my family to graduate high school," Keller said. "Getting my GED, that was the easy way out. Now, because of this program, I know what I'm capable of. This will help me be a good role model to my siblings. I hope to break the cycle in my family of not graduating high school."

Call The Bee's Melody Gutierrez, (916) 326-5521. Follow her on Twitter @MelodyGutierrez.

• **Caption:** Hector Amezcua / hamezcua@sacbee.com Summer program participants Thia Her, left, and Christina Keller unwind by braiding hair after their day at City Hall on Tuesday. The six-week program includes 32 teens and teaches them about city government and the value of volunteerism. Students in Summer at City Hall gather on Wednesday to take turns presenting what they have learned in the summer government program. From left are Yu Cheng, Thia Her, See Khang, Anallely Garcia and Ana Ramos. VIDEO: See City Hall's summer youth program in action. [videos.sacbee.com](http://videos.sacbee.com)

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