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Helping students use what they learn to serve others



When it was first announced that someone at MiraCosta College was being honored with an annual Salute to Women of Color award from the North San Diego County chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Beatriz Palmer thought it was someone else.

“We have two people named Bea at the college,” she says.

But it was Palmer who was recognized alongside six other women for the ways they impact the lives of others through their professional or personal work.

“It is such an honor ... I am humbled that they picked me, too.”

Palmer, 44, is the student services coordinator for the college’s service learning program and volunteer center, where she oversees the program that matches students up with an organization or school that can use that student’s academic skills and interests. Students are able to apply what they’ve learned in class, to the community.

For 11 years she’s been with MiraCosta, where she started out as the program secretary. She lives in Oceanside with her husband, and they have three children. Palmer took some time to

talk about the program, her goals for it and how she hopes to continue positively impacting the students she works with and the surrounding community.

Q: Tell us about the service learning program.

A: It's very different from traditional volunteering. In service learning, there's an opportunity to see the community through an academic lens, to think critically, to plan meaningful and purposeful work, and then the students serve. While the students are serving, they think critically, learn to problem solve, while making connections to their academics. Students learn more about themselves, they explore potential career opportunities, and learn about resources and issues that impact their community, and often become empowered to be part of the solution. We help students find placements in the community, and help identify on-campus service opportunities. There are some students that in reality are very limited in resources, and thus may not be able to go off campus, so I look for events on campus that may need a few service learning students to help.

We've experienced quite a big increase in student participation and that may be due to the social changes that our nation is experiencing. Students are becoming more empowered to connect with others and speak up for causes they feel passionate about. This semester, our program has registered a little over 1,000 students that are doing both service learning hours in the community and volunteer hours. We have service learning in math and science, arts, English, social sciences and architecture.

Q: How is this kind of program beneficial to students?

A: Students get to find immediate relevance to the courses they are taking. They find the real-life application to some of the concepts and theories they learn about through class discussions, texts, lectures, etc. They also begin to build a list of references for future letters of recommendations for transfer, scholarships or even employment. Students discover a lot about themselves through these experiences. They often learn about cultural competencies, how to communicate more effectively through email, phone and in person. I notice that some students have never had jobs, and for them, starting a service learning project is a lot like starting a new job, and these are real-life skills that they can add to a resume. I think for a college campus, service learning is a lot about social justice, and an opportunity to give students a space to learn about their own voice. They learn to become civic-minded individuals, and to engage and connect with others on and off campus.

Q: What led you to the service learning program? Why was this something you wanted to do?

A: Our family has always valued service to others, it's an integral part of who we are and what our faith as Christians is all about: to make Christ look good. Not because our salvation depends on it, but because we get the privilege to live out our faith by serving others. But serving comes easy for us because we love helping. When my husband and I were little, we both grew up with limited resources. His mother, a single mom, raised them in church, serving in church and their

community. In my family, we served but in very different ways. We were very poor, my parents were illiterate and worked in agriculture, my father struggled with alcohol and drug addiction, but they always managed to provide. I remember them always helping. If it wasn't for the kindness of many of the local nonprofits and other programs, we may not have come out of poverty and drugs. So, serving my community and encouraging others is like coming full circle or paying it forward. I am a product of the resources in my community.

What I love about Oceanside...that I live in a working community with diverse families, and that I live near the place where I grew up.

Q: The Salute to Women of Color award recognizes women who make an impact on the lives of others through their professional and personal efforts. What impact do you hope to make?

A: To continue to encourage others to be advocates for themselves and others, and to connect students with opportunities to serve and add to their academic journeys. To help them learn about their community, its issues, and provide them with an opportunity to find solutions to the existing issues. I tell my students, "Go and change the world." They may not be able to change the world right away, but they can start by changing their community.

Q: What's been challenging about your work?

A: To convince people that service learning is not just "fluff" work, that students are really being transformed through these opportunities. It's also difficult to accept that we can't do it all. It's hard to tell a community partner we can't assist them or support them because we don't have the manpower or that the opportunity isn't a good fit. For example, an organization with a really good cause may need students to do physical labor like cleaning, yard work, or construction, and I have to think how those experiences will enrich a student's academic journey. If there isn't a connection to academics, then I have to tell the organization or community partner, "No." That's hard for me.

Q: What's been rewarding about it?

A: Hearing the students' testimonies of how they had an "Aha" moment, or they come back and tell me how that one service learning project reaffirmed their career path, or landed them a job or a scholarship they needed to pay for the things they need to help them be successful. Sometimes it's the little things like, "I didn't know that we had a food pantry," or "I learned about an organization's resources that I myself desperately needed." It's also rewarding to know a student got a job because of the service learning program, or that they got accepted into a four-year college and they think writing about their experiences really helped.

Q: What has it taught you about yourself?

A: Growing up, my family depended on the generosity of many of the local non-profit organizations, so I feel like I am a product of the great work of the organizations in my community. I value my community, so I want to teach others to do the same.

Q: What is the best advice you've ever received?

A: When things get rough, there are two things I think of: lean in and fake it till you make it, and "perhaps this is the moment for which you have been created."

Q: What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A: That I'm a homebody: I love to cook and my ideal vacation is a stay-cation.

Q: Describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: Being able to be with my family and friends, even if it's volunteering together. One of my favorite things to do is serving at a shelter in Vista. I love cooking the meal with my family. It's a lot of work, but then watching the families enjoy a hot, cooked meal, is so rewarding. I know it's altruistic, we say we serve others, but really it fills our cups. It's our way of exercising our faith.