

when homework is more than homework

By Leah Weitz '10

I'll admit it—when I found out that my Spanish V Honors class had required community service hours, I was miffed. I had essays to write, classes to teach, tests to take—and geez, now this? But our teacher, Lauren Reggero-Toledano, insisted that to supplement our class focus on the Hispanic presence in Oregon, each student should go out into the larger community and engage in community service with an organization catering to Hispanics.

The only Hispanic community service opportunity of which I had any awareness at all was Homework Club. Here's what I knew: Catlin Gabel students went somewhere and helped Hispanic kids with their homework, and staffer Mark Lawton plugged it in assembly a lot. With no more information than that, and slightly resentful of the fact that I could be preparing for my next history test instead, I hopped on a bus after school one Thursday bound for this mysterious and elusive Homework Club.

What I found was wonderful. Homework Club, which is run

by Bienestar, a Hispanic farm worker housing service, meets twice a week after school. Five to 10 Catlin Gabel students go to the community center at Reedville Apartments, where we meet up with 20 to 30 kids ranging from 1st through 6th grade. First we help them with their homework, which may consist of writing short stories, completing work sheets, or studying vocabulary. After their homework is done, the students practice reading to us. After a heartily nostalgic dose of Dr. Seuss or Maurice Sendak, it's play time. Catlin Gabel tutors and their students mix while completing puzzles, playing hide and seek, or coloring with crayons.

I work with the 3rd graders. Note that I say work, not worked—for all of my moaning and groaning that first afternoon about the hassle of spending three hours helping kids with their homework instead of completing my own, I somehow found the time to come back . . . every week. It's worth it to watch the kids improve, knowing that you're the one who taught them

how. Take Brenda, whose shy smile hides a spunky and charismatic attitude. When I first met her, her reading skills were excellent—but sometimes she would suddenly halt, staring at a word with blank eyes, before struggling through it and resuming her regular flawless read. I soon learned that Brenda, to whom English is a second language, had never seen or heard a lot of these words before. Now we sit with a dictionary next to us when we read, with the frequency of pauses always decreasing.

It's not just Brenda's vocabulary that has grown during the months I've been working with her. After a few months she hugged me goodbye for the first time, melting my heart like butter, before skipping off like it was no big deal. The next week she showed me a story she had written for school, featuring a character she'd named Leah. Her eyes sparkled as she laughed at my stunned expression. I'm not the only one fortunate enough to have blossoming relationships with these kids: take junior Lily Ellenberg, another Homework Club regular, who finds herself greeted by a cheering cluster of 1st graders every time she arrives.

Over the past months at Homework Club I've come to realize that the relationships we have with these kids isn't just serving them alone. While my 3rd graders have been learning how to multiply, I've been learning how to teach—and realizing how much I love it. I can safely say that I have Homework Club to blame for my projected career choice, and I deeply thank Lauren for pushing me to get involved—because at Homework Club, teaching can be a learning experience too.

Leah Weitz '10 chose to intern at Bienestar for her senior project. She will attend the University of Puget Sound this fall.



Leah Weitz '10 at Homework Club