

## The GIVE Center-Celebrating 20 Years of Service

It is from humble beginnings that many of society's great ideas have sprung. Such a modest start was how Georgia College's GIVE Center-celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year-cemented itself as the place where students, and the community in which they live, are linked through volunteer service.

"It started with a simple red basket," explains Kendall Stiles, senior director of community engagement and co-founder of the GIVE Center. "In 1996, I was coordinator of student programs and a student, Kate Van Cantfort, wanted to create opportunities for students to volunteer in the community. The red basket, located on my desk, is where the prospects for volunteers were kept."

In those early days, Van Cantfort would sit on the floor in Stiles's small office located in the Student Union and go through the phone book to find organizations that could use volunteers. Stiles mentored Van Cantfort in her efforts which resulted in the program's explosion in popularity. The rapid growth gave rise to the creation of the GIVE (Georgia College Inspiring Volunteers to Engage) Center.

From that small, cramped office 20 years ago to today-the Center now occupies an entire renovated wing of the Student Union and has two full-time staff members plus paid student workers.

"Who would have imagined that a red basket and a student's desire to give back to her hometown would lead to the creation of what is now known as the flagship collegiate volunteer center for the state of Georgia," added Stiles.

## **A Helping Hand**

From the start, some of the first organizations to benefit from a relationship with the GIVE Center were the Oconee Prevention Resource Council, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Oconee, The Life Enrichment Center, Communities In Schools, Habitat for Humanity, and the local Red Cross. The impact to these and all organizations that have partnered with the Center is lasting and greatly beneficial to everyone involved.

"Habitat for Humanity Milledgeville - Baldwin County is fortunate to harness the energy and generosity of Georgia College students, through the efforts of the GIVE center," said Murali Thirumal, executive director of Habitat.

The Life Enrichment Center (LEC) was established in 1967 as a private nonprofit program for adults with intellectual disabilities living in the Baldwin Country area. The LEC's Best Buddies program matches individuals from the center with students from Georgia College by compatibility of common interests and personalities. It promotes friendships between people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and those without disabilities.

Before participating in the program, students go through an orientation given by the LEC and GIVE Center. Once matched, the buddies make weekly contact, plan a monthly event, and attend a group event.

"The Life Enrichment Center and the GIVE Center have had a long standing partnership that has afforded numerous individuals with disabilities the opportunity to give back to their community and be viewed for their capabilities not disabilities," stated Barbara Coleman, LEC executive director. "Kendall Stiles truly embraces the idea that we are all more alike than different."

Another organization that has benefited from the students' gifts of giving is the Oconee Regional Project Linus Chapter. This organization provides homemade blankets to children in need, not only in the immediate communities but throughout the entire state. Students have used their creative talents over the years to donate numerous handmade blankets that were given to first responders, hospice camps, hospitals, and social workers-just to name a few-to comfort children in traumatic circumstances.

"The GIVE Center at Georgia College has been a major contributor to our Project Linus Chapter's success," reflected Cookie Noel, chapter coordinator. "Students have made several hundred blankets over the years and have been instrumental for our chapter being able to meet the needs of children in the communities we serve. We've had student sororities, campus clubs, other student groups and individuals contribute to this endeavor. We couldn't do it without them!"

According to Stiles, many of the citizens of Baldwin County have no idea that Georgia College students make up approximately 75-80% of the volunteer workforce. She states that since the creation of the GIVE Center, students have saved the community over 10 million dollars in economy value. This figure was determined by the scale of value of a volunteer's time measured by a dollar value of \$23.56 an hour.

"The GIVE Center is an award-winning volunteer service center that other universities use as a model," noted Dr. Bruce Harshbarger, vice president for student affairs. "It logs dozens of thousands of student volunteer hours each year, and those hours amount to community service worth millions of dollars in hourly labor for the citizens of Milledgeville and Baldwin County."

In addition to the direct partnerships with community nonprofits, the Center also holds dozens of fun student events throughout the academic year that have great impact for people in need. A signature event for 12 years, the Potato Drop, is one such event that brings volunteers to campus to

fight hunger. Around 40,000 pounds of potatoes are dropped on campus and volunteers help process, bag, and load them for community partners.

The center's staff secures the necessary funding in the amount of \$3,000 to ensure the impact of the event is felt throughout the Tri-County area.

“The event utilizes over 200 Georgia College volunteers to make it successful,” said Stiles. “The Drop provides a meal for 130,000 individuals. Wow! What an impact that has had over the years on our community.”

These are only a few of the hundreds of volunteer opportunities that students can choose to participate in through the Center. Some of the others include volunteering with local animal shelters, the Dance Marathon that benefits the Children's Miracle Network, Circle K International, domestic violence awareness, tutoring, and much more.

### **Creating A Legacy**

Throughout the 20-year history of the GIVE Center, Stiles has worked diligently to ensure students realize their good works have lasting impact which becomes their individual legacies. She hopes their engagement with the Center will inspire and motivate them to continue community service after graduation.

She observes, “Many of these students have become citizen leaders who serve the public good. The legacy left behind by these highly engaged students continues to inspire new generations of upcoming students.”

Not only do students leave their influences behind, but the Center itself continues to create a notable legacy recognized by many on campus and around the state.

“The GIVE Center has not only provided resources to help our local community for 20 years now, but it has also vastly enriched the experience our students receive while at Georgia College,” said Dr. Steve Dorman, president. “Each year, hundreds of students volunteer countless hours in our community through the GIVE Center. As part of our liberal arts mission, opportunities through the GIVE Center allow our students to develop leadership skills and become engaged citizens through building a sense of social responsibility.”

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration was held on April 9, and involved over 300 students, alumni, and honored guests. It was at this celebration that a new award-the Eve Puckett Giving Tree Award-was announced. It will be given each year to the graduating student that has left the largest legacy.

Although Stiles can be credited with the founding and much of the accomplishments of the Center, she is quick to point out that it is the community’s support, along with her staff, including her assistant director, that should be highlighted for recognition.

“We are so lucky to have Kristy Johnson as the assistant director for community engagement,” Stiles commented. “She is responsible for: supervising student staff, day to day operations, marketing efforts, coordinating service events and she is the advisor for GC Miracle. Kristy brings a passion to give back, along with the knowledge of and connections in our community. She gets joy from working with college students as they develop into leaders. She has made a significant impact on the Georgia College Campus and in our community. With Kristy on my team, we are moving The GIVE Center to the next level.”

