

Fulcrum Podcast Episode 4: A Generation Rising in Action and Hope

October 2019 (Kiley Testa, CT River Academy and Rosa McGuire, Urban Alliance)
Urban Alliance (urbanalliance.com/fulcrum)

Jaleith Gary

In today's episode, I had the distinct pleasure of sitting down with Kiley Testa from the Connecticut River Academy and UA's very own Rosa McGuire to learn more about how we've partnered to mobilize youth volunteers and how their service is impacting their neighbors' lives and even their own.

All right ladies, why don't you introduce yourselves.

Rosa McGuire

Hi, I'm Rosa McGuire, the Volunteer Manager here at Urban Alliance.

Kiley Testa

Hi everyone. I am Kiley Testa, Community Outreach and Engagement Coordinator at the Connecticut River Academy at Goodwin College.

Jaleith Gary

Awesome. And what does that role entail and how are you working with students?

Kiley Testa

So, I actually have the best job in the building. I don't think anyone will even argue that with me.

I definitely have the best job. I don't have to grade anybody. I get to know students on a different level than in the classroom. So, my job, primarily, is connecting our scholars—we call them scholars not students, because everybody can learn—with outside organizations and try to get them either career exploration or community service opportunities that are different than what they would see in their neighborhoods.

Jaleith Gary

Awesome. So, you all have been partnering with Urban Alliance for a number of years now. What is it five?

Kiley Testa

Yeah, so we actually opened in 2010, our school, and then suddenly...I don't know how Urban Alliance kind of fell into my lap, but we started our relationship back in 2014 and it's just kind of been going strong ever since.

Jaleith Gary

Let's talk about how UAServe fits within your model at your school and then maybe we can also talk about how students have been serving.

Kiley Testa

So, the Connecticut River Academy has three distinct themes that we like to work with: action, awareness and diversity. Action obviously fits perfectly with our volunteers either at FoodShare or World Vision and then diversity—they're in their communities. They're with their peers. They're doing things they haven't been doing as high school students before. And awareness—it probably could even be more perfect or just as perfect as diversity and action—they're seeing what's in their neighborhoods and they're meeting people and talking to people that they probably would just walk by on a normal basis. So, I think our relationship couldn't fit our themes of action, awareness and diversity any better, really.

Jaleith Gary

Oh, that's such a nice compliment. Rosa, thank you for your work on this.

So, what are some ways that students have been serving?

Rosa McGuire

Students have been serving seven different volunteer host sites through UAServe and those seven volunteer host sites are: Bible Way Temple Nation, Building Healthy Families, Church Army USA, Coram Deo Recovery. They also have served in packing Revitalize bags for Urban Alliance, which are distributed through our host sites World Vision and Youth Challenge of Connecticut. And they have been serving since about 2014-2015.

Jaleith Gary

OK so that's a lot of time. And how many students? How many hours? We just want to get an idea of scope.

Rosa McGuire

So, keeping track since 2015 they have been serving for over two thousand hours and we've had over 500 Connecticut River Academy students and staff serve through a number of host sites through UAServe.

Kiley Testa

And I would like to add that Connecticut River Academy doesn't have a community service requirement. These are really just kids who want to give back and be a part of their community. So, it's really interesting because we pull from 50 different towns and are able to get our kids moving in the community, that's East Hartford or Hartford, and be local. So, without a graduation requirement forcing kids to do community service this is all really on their own, in a partnership with UAServe.

Jaleith Gary

Wow. I mean that's really encouraging. That really goes to show just how much this generation is rising to take the role of leadership and to take action and to make the world a better place on their own recognizance. So, that's pretty awesome. Thank you for sharing that.

Rosa McGuire

I'll never forget feedback that we received from one of our Connecticut River Academy students. He said that the experience at Bible Way Temple Nation's Mobile Foodshare was one of the best experiences he had in all of his years in school. He called it, actually, "a feeling of goodness."

Jaleith Gary

Oh wow.

Rosa McGuire

If I were to quote him exactly, I have it here, "Before this day all I thought about was 'why would I help the community when the community never did anything for me?' After today my idea on that has changed. Now I say 'sometimes doing a good deed will get you something in return.' I got smiles, laughs and knowledge."

Kiley Testa

How sweet are they?

Jaleith Gary

Are you excited about the future, though? Seriously, when I think about our young people and the ways that they're just looking at the world and their roles in the world...I just get so excited that they feel this need to do something about it and it's coming from within them. That's really awesome. Thank you.

Rosa McGuire

And these experiences are really eye opening for them, I think, and it just brings them to a greater level of appreciation for what they have and also a desire to really give and be a part of the impact that we all wish to see in our community.

Kiley Testa

Yeah, I think it's a real gift of hope for a lot of our scholars. I think being connected to their community in a positive way is so, so important, so that when they go off to college they're always coming back to say "this place built me and this is how I'm going to continue to give back." So, I definitely think it's a feeling of hope.

Jaleith Gary

Have you received any feedback about their experiences at all?

Kiley Testa

I often see kids coming back with those smiling faces. I don't necessarily need to get a verbal conversation going because, not only am I seeing that, but they want to go again and again and again and then I have to remind them that they have school to attend to, so they can't just go do community service all the time.

Rosa McGuire

But I think even the pictures we have of them serving speak volumes because, at times, they're outside in the freezing cold and you can see that they're all trying to bundle up and keep warm, but their smiles say it all. It doesn't matter that they're out in the cold. They feel a sense of reward.

Kiley Testa

And I think the other really important piece that community service does for our scholars is it connects them in a different way of kind of learning, whether it's about people and empathy, but we see them now in a different light. Just this past Friday we had a connection with one of your organizations and two scholars went who had trouble in school and still find trouble in school and we sent them and the teachers could not have been prouder. They could not have been prouder of themselves, about the work they did. That student, that in particular I'm thinking about, doesn't often go to class and find value in school, is now really wanting to be a part of a continued relationship with that organization and therefore we're using it to say "All right let's get your math work done. All right let's get that and then on Friday we're gone we'll go do this!" And that student is all about it. So, it is connecting our scholars in a different way than a classroom can. So, the impact is greater than a classroom necessarily can do.

Jaleith Gary

Wow. So, what I got from that is that a scholar can have this rewarding volunteer experience that will then motivate them to further invest in themselves after they've already invested in the community.

Kiley Testa

It's a moment of goodness! Like, that kid could not have been more poignant. You know, that's why we're seeing the best out of our students there. They're seeing the best out of themselves, which for a 15-, 16-, 17-year old is so important. It's been really great to see.

Jaleith Gary

Especially at a time when, you know, you're questioning a lot of things in the world, you're questioning a lot of things about your life and your place in this world and you know you're going through puberty and all of that...

Kiley Testa

You don't think your impact will be great.

Jaleith Gary

What a beautiful thing that they can find some purpose and some identity serving one another and serving other people in their community.

So, Rosa, I really want to hear, from your perspective, if there are any scholars that stand out to you from Connecticut River Academy.

Rosa McGuire

Yes, actually, there is. Every year UAServe hosts an appreciation event and we celebrate the efforts of the UAServe volunteers and those who have gone that extra mile, who have gone above and beyond. And I remember one particular year, Mike Bassett from World Vision nominated a student from Connecticut River Academy. He actually said that she was “amazing”—that she served twice a week and helped sort donations, restock the Teacher Resource Center and Essential Supply Center. And he praised her for her smile, her great attitude, consistency, hard work and thoughtfulness.

What I really liked to see at the event was that this particular student, she received a certificate of recognition from UAServe and from Mike Bassett. She received an Urban Alliance sweatshirt for being a UAServe Champion—and a UAServe Champion is simply someone who has served twenty five hours or more—and she has actually served much more than that. And she won a microwave.

Jaleith Gary

Oh wow. All right! So, she'll have a microwave for this next stage in life.

Rosa McGuire

It was actually very memorable to see. She had guests come with her to celebrate her accomplishments and the efforts that she put forth at World Vision. It was great.

Jaleith Gary

That's nice. No, seriously, I'm not even joking about the microwave. I need a new one.

Kiley Testa

That student actually had the community service in her schedule. So, she was able to...I don't know if everybody has seen that Goodwin transportation bus, but that bus would drop off students here two days a week. So, she was here for probably about an hour and a half, two hours, so a total of four hours a week for an entire semester. And I think this particular student signed on to do it twice. So, she was here for a full year, doing it two days a week. She got great work skills. It's on her résumé. So, it was a great partnership for a handful of the students that year.

Jaleith Gary

So just to clarify, there is a bus that comes here twice a week.

Kiley Testa

Yes, a Goodwin College transportation bus.

Jaleith Gary

So that was something that you all had worked out here, in the partnership between CTRA and UAServe?

Kiley Testa

That's the bus that we see.

Jaleith Gary

Things are starting to make sense now. I always see this bus and I'm just like "Wow, they're so nice. Like every student that ever wants to come gets this personal ride."

Jaleith Gary

That's pretty awesome that y'all are so committed to this and doing it in such an authentic way. Because it isn't a requirement for graduation. So, it's not like tokenizing service or tokenizing the people being served.

Kiley Testa

The student didn't get credit for that—even like high school credit—the student had some wiggle room in her schedule and we were able to make it happen for her to get more work experience.

Jaleith Gary

Wow. That's awesome!

Rosa McGuire

It's interesting to note that just last week we had a UAServe orientation at Connecticut River Academy and we filled the cafeteria—over a hundred scholars and staff were there. And I had a sign-up sheet so it was definitely over a hundred. It was great. It was great to see the enthusiasm, the interest and just preparing them for the new school year.

Jaleith Gary

That was great. I mean, this is great news. Because ultimately what's happening is the host sites that we are working with, the programs that we're working to build capacity in, they have a need for volunteers. It's not like we're just mobilizing volunteers for the sake of it. There is a genuine need in the community to build capacity in these programs that need people to operate. And so they're really filling that need.

So that's pretty awesome actually that's very encouraging to me when I think about the programs that we're serving and the people that they serve.

Kudos to both of you because I think, no seriously, I think that this kind of a partnership requires people who are committed to making the community a better place, people who are committed to these young people that are volunteering, people who want them to have a good experience—and by “people” I mean you two. So, I just want to say thank you on behalf of myself and also on behalf of Urban Alliance and everyone listening for the work that you've done because you've cultivated and nurtured and fostered this this habit, and this component of their personalities and of their being that you've encouraged to serve. I don't think that that would be happening just on

its own. You know it does require a lot of coordination and a lot of you know dedication of time and resources. So, thank you both.

Kiley Testa

Thank you.

Rosa McGuire

Thank You.

And as Kiley said, it's probably the best job ever because we just find it to be so rewarding to see how lives are changed not only...you know, we think we're changing lives outside, out in the community, but as we saw, we're actually...our lives are changing. The scholar's lives are changing. Everything around this is changing.

Jaleith Gary

So, with all of that said I'm curious to know if there are any other things that we can even celebrate about our partnership together.

Kiley Testa

So, I think it may be small to people, but I think the excitement and pure joy that I see coming back on kids' faces about this is really something to celebrate. There are times that we don't see our kids smiling very much lately and I think that these opportunities are reasons for kids to find happiness in high school and find happiness in their community. And I think that is something we should be celebrating; that if we didn't have this relationship these opportunities would not be coming up. If my administration in Connecticut River Academy and Goodwin College's relationship wouldn't allow us to do this then things like this wouldn't be happening for our magnet school.

So, I do think that the happiness coming back on these kids' faces, and the fact that they want to go back and do it again, is something to celebrate.

Jaleith Gary

So, Kiley, what would you say to any other school administrators listening about getting their young people involved in the community?

Kiley Testa

I think it's our job as educators to find the time in a school day to make it happen. I think classroom time is very important. And you know, the typical math and English, absolutely should be there. Yes. But I think that you need to find time—whether it's an hour a week or you know 45 minutes—do something. Get our scholars out there doing and learning in a different way, finding empathy, helping people because the world is only going to be so good for so long if we stop doing that.

So, we need to make sure that administrators are finding time in the school day. And speaking as a parent, speaking as an educator, the more empathy that we can create in young people's lives the better.

Jaleith Gary

Oh yeah. Very good. Very true. And Rosa, what would you say to any educators and administrators listening in?

Rosa McGuire

We're here to help. And if you would like to know more about how to partner with us, I'd love to sit down with you at any given time and discuss further what your interest is and how you'd like to involve your students and your staff. And we can take it from there.

Kiley Testa

And, Rosa is being very modest she makes it very, very easy to get people serving. So, if you find the time in your school day, contact UAServe because you will be able to get volunteers out there soon... within like a week. Yeah. She moves really quickly. She makes it really easy.

Jaleith Gary

Thank you for that, Rosa.

Thank you for joining us for today's episode. To learn more about Connecticut River Academy, UAServe, and how we're partnering to mobilize volunteers and strengthen programs together, visit <http://urbanalliance.com/fulcrum>.