In the spring semester of my first year, I got bored. I realized that I did little more than go to class every day and do my work in the evenings. I started asking myself: what’s the point? What am I doing with my time at Smith that really matters? I got involved with the Community Service Office because I wanted to do something with my time at Smith, and I had found working as a Big Sister in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program to be very rewarding (and challenging) in high school. I knew that I loved working with kids, but I wanted my experience at Smith to be different from my high school experience. I started working with refugee students at Kensington Elementary School in Springfield, Massachusetts.

My first semester at Kensington, I worked with a friendly, chatty fifth grader from Nepal. I decided I wanted to learn a few words in Nepali, to try to break the ice a bit. When I asked him how he was (in what I’m sure was a terrible accent) he looked at me with big eyes and asked “How did you know that?” I felt like I had made a connection – and I started to look forward to heading out to Kensington every week. Since that semester, I’ve worked with two other students at the elementary school, each with their own unique traits and challenges. And while the program has evolved from when I first started, I’ve learned so much about how important the institutions we establish for our students are for supporting their individual growth and development.

I certainly haven’t come across that “purpose” I naively set out to find when I started working with Kensington – instead, I’ve found a place where I can explore that desire to work on something bigger than myself. Through the work I’ve done with the Community Service Office, I’ve had the opportunity to work with students one-on-one, within a classroom setting, and within a community. As cheesy as it may sound, I’ve learned so much about myself and about what I want to do with my life from the kids I’ve worked with, and I can only hope that the relationships I’ve developed are reciprocal -that I’ve given back to the schools and communities I’ve worked in something close to what they’ve given me.

Self-Exploration through CSO
by Kelly Francis ’15

Contact the Community Service Office
cso@smith.edu
or call 585-2793
and “like” our Facebook page
www.facebook.com/cso

During the spring semester of 2013, the CSO Fund Drive raised $877 for the Arise for Social Justice Emergency Fund for Homelessness. Thank you to everyone at Smith for helping and contributing!
Perspective from a First Year

By Emma Schlam ’16

Question: What has surprised you in your volunteering lately?

Answer: The students surprise me every day with how much they enjoy coming to class. Teachers and students bring fun and laughter into the lessons. When the kids are given writing tasks they always add extra flair with their drawings; a few of which I am terrible at, though no one seems to mind. We share stories. We laugh.

During my time volunteering at Safe Passage last summer, I realized how quickly they learn. I only see them once a week, but the differences are evident. They handle their new surroundings and start learning English within the past few years. They started learning English within the past few years. They are. I think what surprises me the most is that. For me, those weekly nights at the shelter are a reminder that there’s a world other than the Smith bubble, and it’s closer, and maybe a little brighter, than it may seem.

Visit Safe Passage
43 Center St., Suite 304
(413) 586-1125
Toll-free hotline:
(888) 345-5282

Community Education Lunches from Spring 2013:

The Literacy Project
The Treehouse Foundation
Arise for Social Justice
Brothers Big Sisters

CSO Executive Board
Community Education Chairs for 2012-2013:
Rumbidzai Vushe ’14
Talia Abner ’14

Gettting Out of the Smith Bubble

By Kristen De Lancey ’15

I started volunteering at the Interfaith Cot Shelter last year, soon after I first arrived at Smith. At a CSO fair, I stopped by the table and spoke to Barbara Blumenthal, one of the organizers of the program. I had never really done anything like it before, but I thought it would be a way for me to engage with a part of the community I would not normally get a chance to interact with while on Smith campus.

Like all of the other volunteers, I visit the shelter one night each week. With my partner, I wash dishes, bag laundry, do any other chores the staff might need help with. After the work is done, we spend the remaining time hanging out with the guests—watching TV, playing cards, talking.

Even though the shelter is only about a ten-minute walk from my house on campus, it can sometimes feel like a completely different world. The stakes are higher. If I miss a deadline, it means I might get a bad grade. If the guests don’t make it back to the shelter on time, it might mean they won’t have a place to sleep for the night. Even when guests are at the shelter, receiving their basic needs, there is always the worry about what comes next—finding a job that can allow them to provide these things for themselves. It’s not an easy task.

But somehow, the atmosphere at the shelter is almost always light-hearted and fun. We watch Jeopardy, trying to get the answers before the contestants on TV. We lament the limitations of basic cable on a weekday night. We play card games, most of which I am terrible at, though no one seems to mind. We share stories. We talk about life. We laugh.

Often, while I’m at the shelter, one of the guests will ask if I get paid to be there. When he say, no, he or she will usually laugh and ask, “Well, why are you here then?” I tell them it’s because I like to be there, which is true. But I think the answer is a bit more complex than that. For me, those weekly nights at the shelter are a reminder that there’s a world other than the Smith bubble, and it’s closer, and maybe a little brighter, than it may seem.

Volunteer through Short Term Projects

By Yukin (Alice) Wang ’15

As the CSO short-term project co-chairs, we are primarily involved in facilitating several community service projects with the Smith student body, the majority of which last two to three hours. This semester, we have worked with several local organizations, such as the Interfaith Cot Shelter, where we coordinated with students to provide a weekend clean-up service for the shelter and its residents. We have also worked with Nuesstras Raíces, a local grassroots organization dedicated to promoting economic improvement through agricultural and environmental projects, where several Smith students volunteered to help raise flower beds in their youth garden. Such projects have provided us with numerous opportunities to positively impact the community. Overall, our experiences have been extremely rewarding and humbling. We gained personal satisfaction by dedicating our time to a worthy cause, and we have also contributed to alleviating existing problems within our community. As a part of the broader CSO board, we’ve also participated in larger projects outside of short-term tasks, such as working with Arise for Social Justice, a non-profit organization dedicated to the elevation of low-income and homeless persons. As this semester’s fund drive, the CSO has jointly launched a college-wide initiative towards promoting social justice through an intensive fundraising campaign. Though these projects, we aspire to augment and strengthen Smith College students’ interests in public involvement, which have enduring benefits for both the student and for the neighboring community in general.

Alice Wang ’15 is a short-term co-chair with Isabelle Ross ’15 and Susan Wu ’15.

Students participate in Short Term Project “Garden the Community” in Springfield, MA. Short-Term Chair Isabelle Ross ’15 and Lawrence House CSO Representative Victoria Wolff ’16 are featured here. Photos from Victoria Wolff ’16.
By Lou Goore ’15

Before coming to Smith, I attended a two-year program in South Africa. The program’s curriculum revolved around leadership, entrepreneurship and African studies. While attending the academy, my teammates and I started a community service project. The project aims to empower a disadvantaged community in Johannesburg through agriculture. Although my friends and I were fully equipped with the knowledge to implement a successful project, we faced tremendous challenges executing our project. We were no longer dealing with hypothetical examples. We had to work with a community with real problems. The project execution process was a valuable learning opportunity because I gained hands on experience outside of class. From this project, I have learned to work in a team, to accept constructive criticism, to be humble and to carry a project from beginning to end. Education is what happens in class. Learning is what happens outside of class.

When I arrived to Smith, I decided to get involved in the Community Service Organization (CSO) in order to not only serve my community, but to learn more about others and about myself. During my first year, I was a CSO house representative, so I acted as a liaison between the CSO and my house. My experience as a CSO representative was very rewarding. I got to learn a lot about marketing, communication, volunteerism, and fundraising. I also realized that the more I served others the more I received. I have received happiness, satisfaction, knowledge and friends. Community service is a two way street. It is about giving and receiving.

My name is Lou. I am currently a sophomore and a member of the CSO board. My role is to act as an intermediary between the board and the CSO house representatives. Collaborating with the board and the CSO house representatives to advertise and encourage community service involvement on campus has been a blessing. As a team, we managed to raise more than $800 for Arise for Social Justice, to recruit about 240 donors for the blood drive and to brighten the lives of 55 children by giving them gifts for the winter holidays. These achievements would not have been possible without the effort and the contribution of the Smith community, the CSO house representatives, the CSO board and staff members.

“Every change starts in a small step. Let’s make that small step together.” Ron Stolero

Reflections on Youth Mentoring and Volunteering

By Aviva Jacobstein ’13

When I look back on all of my college experiences, both academically and through work and volunteerism, everything has pointed me in the direction of working with youth and families. I have always enjoyed spending time with children, and received some of the most challenging, and rewarding, moments working with them over the past 4 summers I have been a camp counselor and through volunteering with children living in homeless and domestic violence shelters. However, aside from babysitting I had never had an on-going one-on-one relationship with a child. So when I heard about Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) I was up for the challenge, and I couldn’t be happier about my decision to get involved.

My Little Sister Erin and I were matched 2 years ago, when she was 9 and just beginning 4th grade. We immediately bonded over our shared love of craft projects, music, exploring, milkshakes, laughing, and getting our nails done. We always plan crazy projects together, as Erin is one of the most creative little girls I have ever met, and she is always looking for the next big thing to make her own. From decorating T-shirts, to tote bags, stress balls, hot dogs made out of clay, and bedazzling our phone cases, her energy and creative spirit never ceases to amaze me.

Most of the children involved in the BBBS program were referred because they could benefit from having an extra positive adult role model in their lives; someone who can play with them and teach them new and exciting things about the world. Growing up as an only child, I was fortunate enough to live in a loving two-parent household, and be surrounded by friends, family, and amazing teachers who provided me with constant guidance and support. By being a Big Sister, I knew that I would be able to be that positive adult force in someone else’s life, and make sure that my Little Sister has someone that she can count on and ask questions about all of the new and sometimes terrifying changes that come with growing up.

Erin is 11 now, in full swing of her pre-teen years and getting ready to enter middle school. I have enjoyed watching her mature, both in her interactions with the other girls in our program, the way she carries herself and her outlook on the world. In so many of my other work and volunteer experiences with children I take on the role of caregiver, social worker, or therapist, and it has been refreshing to have an on-going relationship with my Little that is based around having fun and just being her mentor and friend. As Erin and I both get ready to graduate and head off into these next chapters in our lives, I know that we will stay in touch and continue to learn from each other. For now though every time I get a question about the giant sparkly gems glued to my phone I can’t help but smile and say that my Little Sister did it.

CSO Board Spring 2103

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Susan Wu - Short Term Project Co-Chair

Questions?
Email cso@smith.edu or x2793 and “like” our Facebook page www.facebook.com/SmithCSO