The Week That Becomes a Lifetime
Community Service Center celebrates twenty years of creating volunteers

It’s easy to spot the first batch of freshman arrivals at Boston University: on campus a week before classes begin, they travel about the city in large white vans, wear matching T-shirts, and sometimes spontaneously break into song and dance.

These participants in the First-Year Student Outreach Project (FYSOP) may stand out. But for the thousands of students who’ve joined FYSOP since it was founded in 1989, the annual precollege volunteer program is what makes them fit in.

“The first week of college marks the beginning of four very important, character-building years,” says Shannon Dickerson (COM’11), who will return to FYSOP this August for her second stint as a team leader. “I think it’s fantastic that FYSOP sets that foundation for so many freshmen.”

This year, FYSOP, run by the Community Service Center, will celebrate its twentieth year at BU by welcoming 600 members of the Class of 2013. Each student will spend three days volunteering at various sites throughout greater Boston. By the end of the week, they will have clocked more than 13,000 hours of service — and CSC history shows that’s just the start. Many FYSOP volunteers return year after year as staff members and coordinators, and hundreds go on to participate in other CSC programs, from spring break service trips to food-redistribution efforts, says CSC director Lindsey Wyld Kotowicz. “That first week in FYSOP is when students make the friends they carry with them for four years,” she says. “They don’t want the experience to end, so they continue to volunteer with the CSC.”

“There’s definitely a high retention rate,” says Brandon Polcik (CAS’09), who is putting in a record fifth year with FYSOP this summer. “I wanted to do FYSOP one last time before heading out into the real world.”

Many students are initially drawn to FYSOP to get a head start on meeting their classmates. “BU is so big, I worried that I’d have a hard time meeting friends,” says Alyssa Shames (CAS’12), who volunteered at the Boston Children’s Museum during her FYSOP session. But Dickerson says that the face-to-face interactions with the city’s neediest populations get people hooked. Two years ago, when Polcik took a FYSOP group to a homeless shelter in Jamaica Plain, they helped weed gardens and clean up a nearby playground. The volunteers hadn’t even gotten dirty yet when a small group of children came outside to work and play with them.

“It was really special,” Polcik recalls, “because interacting with the kids allowed us to put a face to the people we were helping.”

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