



BY JAMES BUSHMAN

**T**his fall, the entire sophomore class from University High School spent a day away from the classroom on an old-fashioned field trip.

Early that morning, students piled on buses and took off – not to visit traditional venues in the Bay Area or on the Central Coast but rather to work in community-based organizations in Fresno. Students learned about what services these organizations provided before they spent part of the day engaged in volunteer work.

They volunteered at the Salvation Army, Poverello House, Rescue the Children, Ronald McDonald House, Catholic Charities and Community Food Bank. Students did a little bit of everything: packing boxes and backpacks of food for hungry families, weeding flower gardens, preparing a garden for a vegetable planting, wrapping donation barrels and even putting together hygiene packets for Fresno's homeless.

"It was really humbling," said Sohan Banerjee a sophomore class officer, "the day before, I



University High students Emily Dack, Jenna Sloan and Mikey Talta volunteer at the Fresno Rescue Mission as part of their civic education and community service.

## University High puts civic education to work

was complaining about how much homework I have to do, and then I was downtown listening to folks without food and shelter."

Nationally ranked University High School is well known for its college preparatory program and emphasis on music, but a primary goal of the school is to produce graduates

with good civic values and a desire to be contributing members in our community. In 2015, the school won the Bonner Center Award for Character and Citizenship.

Civic education for students starts before the first day of school. At orientation, incoming freshmen learn about the school's focus on char-

acter and are taught the keys to the school's culture: Be understanding, honorable and studious.

All freshmen read Sean Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens," a book designed to promote character values.

Students have conferences with the top school administrators and their counselor to discuss the

importance of exhibiting good behavior.

On Character Education Day, the entire student body gathers to recite and sign the School's Code of Character under the guidance of local community leaders such as Fresno's district attorney or mayor. All of these efforts continue into the junior and senior years as students prepare for college.

But it is during the sophomore year when, for most, these lessons hit home. Students learn not only why getting involved in our community matters, but how to become a volunteer and contribute.

"Field trips like these expose students to ways they can help the community," said Hallie Gamueda, the sophomore class vice president.

Don Eskes, the CEO of the Fresno Rescue Mission, agrees, and he would like to see more visits from students.

"It gives our youth an awareness of the greater needs of the community and the opportunity to think about solutions to the critical issues of the homeless and underserved," Eskes said.

At UHS, students must serve 10 hours of volunteer work each semester to graduate, and they have risen to the challenge. The average number of hours earned by students exceeds the school's requirement. The school helps by showcasing community service opportunities through its Leo Club,

sponsored by the local Lions Club. Last year, 40 percent of the UHS students were active Leo Club members.

At graduation each year, the school gives the John D. Welty Community Service Award to the student recognized by their peers as having contributed the most to the community through service. Last year's winner, Rebecca Mann, volunteered well over 1,000 hours. She, perhaps, expresses the value of community participation best.

"Volunteering has certainly made me a better citizen and a better part of the community," Rebecca says. "It builds character by challenging us students to be leaders, take initiative, persevere and work hard even as we work together."

In schools, it is easy to talk about citizenship and character, but getting students to willingly engage in our community is more challenging. Students need to learn what they can do, how they can get involved and why their efforts matter.

That's because, if we want our students to be a force in our community in the future, we need to teach them to care about our community today.

*James Bushman is head of school at University High School and a proud Rotarian.*