

Despite Social Distancing, Community Connections Grow Stronger through First Serve — by Jen Wenger

When the students of Akron's North High School (NHS) are permitted to return to campus, some of them may feel excited, some may feel a little nervous, and, if they're like any other high school students on the planet, some may feel a twinge of dread. But one thing's for sure: every student will feel welcome.

That's because First Serve volunteers, NHS teachers, NHS student members and Hudson High School students teamed together this past summer to paint an eye-catching mural on the sidewalk leading up to the school building. NHS's richly diverse international population in North Hill is the inspiration for the mural, which displays each of the flags of the students' countries of origin as well as the word "Welcome" in each student's native language.

"The mural is beautiful and brings a sense of joy to all of our students when they're able to identify with their culture," said Kim Sabetta, campus principal and a 1991 graduate of NHS. "I love that it demonstrates to our students that you belong here, and that we welcome each and every one of you."

The sidewalk mural was one of several projects that were carried out in a new partnership between First Serve and NHS. Of course, COVID-19 presented its share of challenges. Whereas other FCCH programs found creative alternatives for dealing with COVID -19, First Serve is one program that can't be Zoomed or live-streamed. However, not only was it not canceled, it was expanded from one day to a whole Summer of Service, culminating in the traditional event, which was held on September 13.

Adjustments were made to protect everyone's health, including mandatory face masks, social distancing, scaled-back work crews, and an increased focus on outdoor or volunteer-from-home projects. More than 600 volunteers took part in one or more of the 42 projects at 15 sites across North Hill. Volunteers represented more than 20 faith-based communities or organizations, with the top three organizers being FCCH, the Islamic Society of Akron and Kent, and Temple Beth Shalom of Hudson. This year's sponsors were Huntington Akron Foundation, FCCH, Akron Community Foundation, Faith Lutheran Church, and the City of Akron.

Hudson High School was also well represented this year, and senior Grady Zappone, who participated in several First Serve projects, had this to say about student involvement: "I believe it's excruciatingly important for students to get involved in community projects like First Serve, not just to learn construction skills, but to build bonds with people who care about helping others."

Because Akron schools are adhering to virtual-only learning for the time being, most NHS students haven't yet seen the mural or other improvements around school. However, some student athletes have already gotten a glimpse of a few of the changes when they arrived for practice, and they overwhelmingly approve.

"My soccer coach told me that her students were just in love with the mural," Sabetta said. "They were showing off their flags. They were so proud."

Sabetta couldn't be more pleased and appreciative for the projects that were collaborated on this year—each created to benefit the students in a meaningful way. In addition to the mural, other

improvements include the “hall of fame” sports hallway, where pictures of past NHS athletes have been reframed as a way of honoring alumni. Also, soccer players have been provided with new cubbies constructed especially for them. In addition, a memorial area is being created for Na'kia Crawford, a recent NHS graduate who, tragically, was murdered this past June.

“That is going to be meaningful to her family, to her friends, and to her teachers,” said Sabetta.

“In addition to the other projects, volunteers assembled 13,900 kits of learning materials and supplies for all five Akron public schools located in North Hill, as well as for Kindergarten students in Summit County,” said Sue Wimer, co-chair of First Serve and Outreach at FCCH. Kris Stoehr is serving as Wimer’s co-chair of First Serve for the first time this year.

Wimer and Stoehr envision building upon the NHS partnership, so that students, their parents, and the North Hill neighborhoods in which they live can take part in and benefit more from First Serve community projects. Wimer believes that First Serve’s Adopt-a-School program with Findley Community Learning Center could serve as a blueprint for NHS.

“What warms my heart the most is when I saw one of the Hudson seniors and one of our students collaborating and building relationships,” said Sabetta. “These students get to experience the amazing things that our students have to offer as well as vice versa. They may have never met before, and First Serve brings that to our students and to First Serve volunteers. So the relationship-building is first and foremost. I just love that aspect of it.”

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