Most days on the job, second-year "Ace" Aaron Remenschneider finds himself face-to-monitor with a computer. Recruiting and keeping volunteers informed, via classroom meetings and e-mail, is a big part of this senior's duties as a liaison between Indiana University service-learners and Stone Belt.

The Advocate for Community Engagement program seeks to bridge the gap between town and gown by engaging students as partners with area nonprofit agencies. Students in the A.C.E. program do many of the things a part-time staffer might do, while facilitating IU volunteer involvement with the agencies.

On this particularly sunny afternoon, however, pre-med student, biology and African-American studies major Remenschneider is in a small classroom at Stone Belt, leading a volunteer orientation.

"I'm going to have expectations; your professors are going to have expectations; but most importantly, the consumers and staff have expectations," Remenschneider tells about half-a-dozen volunteers. 

As an Advocate for Community Engagement at Stone Belt, he is expected to carry on the mission of the city's 10th largest employer: to "prepare, empower and support persons with developmental disabilities (called consumers) and their families to participate fully in the life of the community."

"We definitely put consumers first," he tells the group. "That's why we're here."

As a go-between, motivator, organizer and team leader, he says that volunteering is also a means to get to know the community outside IU's campus.

One of about 20 program advocates, Remenschneider works closely with a community partner and full-time Stone Belt employee, Kristen Manno.

All IU students in the three-year-old A.C.E. program have community partners. They meet once a week as a group, and are commissioned at about $7 an hour to do 10 hours of work each week. There are no grades and no tests because the program, which attracts many graduates of service-learning classes, is not a class.

Instead, student participants serve as a link between faculty members and about 20 local nonprofit agencies, including Stone Belt, Boys & Girls Club, WonderLab and Hoosier Hills Food Bank.

"This is our first year of plugging into the program, and we're glad to do it," Stone Belt director Larry Pejeau said.

"We have a tremendous need for volunteers, but it's just really hard to place them," he said.

According to Pejeau, Remenschneider's experience at both IU and Stone Belt allow him to better help potential student volunteers work around their class schedules, while orienting them to Stone Belt policies and goals.

That's exactly how program coordinators say the program is supposed to work.

The participants are intended to be "connectors and bridge-builders," says program director Claire King, an instructional consultant and assistant director of Community Outreach and Partnerships in Service-Learning at IU.

The program, King adds, "gives students a chance to really challenge and apply material that they've been learning in the classroom."

King worked with former program director and unit director Joann Campbell to prepare for her role at the helm this year.

Since its founding by former IU faculty member Julie Reed, the program has grown from three volunteers to about 20. According to Reed and Campbell, the program was established to give students a real-world sense of the daily goings-on at nonprofit agencies. Challenges faced are real, not hypothetical, and are not contrived for the purposes of education.

Moreover, Campbell says, the experience is more in-depth than some internships, as students don't shadow but directly undertake complex tasks, such as volunteer recruitment, training and development.

As part of the program, first-year participant Arnold Lane is spending time with youth at the Banneker Center. The IU senior chats with some children as a dog named Mia jumps through hoops and does other tricks.

"The dog's got a crush on you," jokes one girl to Lane.

Lane divides his time as a go-between for volunteers and center staff and working one-on-one with children.

"The life and joy of a child is so different from when you get a little older," he said with a smile, like a doting father.

Having an A.C.E. program volunteer coordinator who knows the rigors of the daily class grind and the landscape of the volunteer field is a definite plus, according to volunteers.

"We can empathize more with them, and they can empathize more with us," said IU sophomore Caitlin Cleary. Lane and Emily Daniel led her orientation. Daniel works with Bloomington Parks and Recreation Department, of which the Banneker Center is a part.

The cherry on top for second-year participant Daniel?

"We get to share joy with other volunteers as we help others volunteer," she said.

Reporter Michael Schroeder can be reached at 331-4371 or by e-mail at mschroeder@heraldt.com.

© 1997 - 2009 Hoosiertimes Inc.
No commercial reproduction without written consent.
Electronic reproduction of any kind forbidden without written consent.