

CANCER CARE STUDENTS HELP ISOLATED FAMILIES DURING PANDEMIC

Service learning students pivot to help those in critical need remotely



Isabel Greenstein takes precautions as she loads groceries for a delivery to Christopher's Haven.

She wears a mask, has a heart of gold, and arrives just in time. Isabel Greenstein is a sophomore sociology major at Suffolk University, but she's a superhero to the kids at **Christopher's Haven** (<http://www.christophershaven.org/>), an organization that provides temporary homes for families while their children receive cancer care at Boston hospitals.

Greenstein is delivering groceries and essential items so the families, whose children are immunocompromised from their treatment, can avoid exposure to infection during the coronavirus pandemic.

“I can’t imagine what it’s like for these families. Having a child with cancer is already the most stressful experience of these families’ lives, never mind having a child with cancer in the middle of a pandemic. So I just wanted to do what I could to help,” says Greenstein, who travels from her home in nearby Natick, Massachusetts, to fulfill the grocery lists.

It’s just one way she and her classmates in Suffolk’s Cancer Care service learning class are adapting to meet the changing needs of their partner organization in this challenging time.

New priorities

“When the semester started I didn’t have any experience with kids,” says Elena Bonetti, a finance major who was hesitant at first about her role as part of the service learning group tasked with bringing cheer to families. “But just being there, being a presence, they started to get used to me. If they were coloring I’d pick up a crayon and join them, and the kids would have a chance to talk to me about things other than their treatment.”



“Suffolk students always go above and beyond to support and celebrate our Christopher’s Haven families. Now, when our families are feeling so isolated, it means a lot to know the students are still thinking about them,” says Catie

As Bonetti's group engaged the children in fun activities, others helped with administrative work and on-site tasks such as preparing the apartments for new families. Another group focused on fundraising and outreach for the organization's high profile annual event in May, a fashion show that pairs patients and their siblings with professional Boston athletes. Last year, Suffolk students helped bring in \$20,000 through the event's silent auction to help keep Christopher's Haven's programs running.

In mid-March, everything changed. The pandemic sent most students back to their homes - Bonetti down the street to Boston's North End, but others as far away as China - while Christopher's Haven hunkered down, keeping families safe inside and making the painful decision to cancel their fashion show fundraiser.

Professor Jessica Mak (/academics/faculty/m/a/jessica-mak) and student Olivia Marotta worked with Catie MacWilliams, Family Services manager at Christopher's Haven, to brainstorm new ways to meet the families' most pressing needs and then reached out to the students for help. Since cancer treatment makes the children much more susceptible to infections, reducing potential exposure to the coronavirus was the most critical concern.

"The parents are terrified to leave their home because they're so nervous about putting their child at even more risk," says finance major Karlie Robbins, a member of the fashion show fundraising group. "Our goal is to make it so that these parents never have to step outside of the building except for their child's treatment."

Robbins' team shifted their focus from soliciting high-end silent auction items for the fashion show to bringing in donations of toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and groceries. They drafted a letter to local grocers and big box stores explaining the needs, and created wish lists of basic items on Amazon to crowd-source donations from their own networks.



Students sent hand-made cards to each family at Christopher's Haven. "I'm so impressed by the way the students have stepped up and extended themselves during these challenging times to continue service learning efforts for this amazing organization in need of our support. They quickly adapted to their new projects to ensure they met the current needs of the kids and families at Christopher's Haven," says Professor Jessica Mak.

Bonetti's group is now crafting hand-made cards and creating lists of activities the families can do to stave off boredom while confined to their apartments. In addition to finding virtual tours and online resources, they recommend hands-on projects like creating motivational vision boards and coronavirus time capsules that allow the children to reflect on their experience with an eye toward the future.

In normal times, a special party is held in Christopher's Haven's communal loft space for each child as they finish cancer treatment and prepare to return home. Families gather, and the "graduating" child often pops balloons to mark the cancer treatments they've completed. "Recently, one boy popped forty balloons, one for each session of radiation he went through. It's very cathartic," says MacWilliams.

Since in-person celebrations aren't possible right now, the Suffolk students are using seed grant money from the Center for Community Engagement to plan a special surprise: care packages of helium and balloons will be delivered to each apartment so that families can still mark that joyous milestone.



Each child receives a special balloon and bell-ringing celebration when they finish their cancer treatment. Suffolk students are making sure no child misses out on this important milestone by sending care packages of helium and balloons.

Dedicated to service

Olivia Marotta, a public relations and marketing major who helped with the fashion show last year and now serves as the course's service learning assistant mentor, started holding weekly Zoom office hours to advise the groups on their new remote activities. When she first came to Suffolk as a transfer student, participating in service learning "was a way to get involved in the community," she says. Now she's picked up a new hobby as a way to help from home: teaching herself to sew and crafting over 200 masks for healthcare workers and the families at Christopher's Haven.

She is proud to continue that service by helping other students pivot quickly.

"We made a commitment to support Christopher's Haven in whatever way they need, and although that has changed dramatically, we are still there to help in any way that we can."

Olivia Marotta

PR/Marketing, Class of 2021



"Sewing face masks has been a great way to spend time and feel productive by helping others. I have been able to send a dozen to Christopher's Haven, and most of the others I have sewn have gone to healthcare workers across the country."

It has been great being able to provide a piece of comfort and security to people in this uncertainty and it is a good break to have something to do with my hands after finishing my school work on the computer," says Olivia Marotta.

Bonetti became part of a generations-long family community service tradition when she joined her North End neighborhood's St. Agrippina Women's Mutual Benefit Society. That group has also shifted how they give back during the pandemic by fundraising online to deliver care packages to at-risk Boston seniors. Working with the society and with the families at Christopher's Haven gives Bonetti a sense of purpose, especially during the pandemic.

"It's very important to give back to the city because it means giving back to these families in need, and also indirectly to my family, and my neighbors," says Bonetti.

The experience is also personal for Karlie Robbins, who lost her grandmother to cancer earlier in the semester. "When I told her I was taking this course she was excited for me. I think she would be proud of the way we've been able to help."

Robbins says working with the children at Christopher's Haven has given her perspective on being isolated at home in Brockton, Massachusetts.

"I'm in the comfort of my own home, surrounded by my family, but they're in a strange place, in some cases hundreds or thousands of miles from everyone they know," says Robbins. "You take a lot for granted, and then you see these little kids going through something so difficult, and yet they're still positive and they're playing and they're happy, and it's amazing to see the hope that they have."



"The heart the students bring to their service is a direct reflection of Suffolk. There is so much we couldn't do without them," says Catie MacWilliams. (photo provided by Christopher's Haven)

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