

Service learning is more than volunteer work. The initiative redefines classroom learning and fills a distinct need in the community as Deann Paulson has discovered.



## LESSONS FROM THE COMMUNITY

by Karen Burbach

**U**NMC students spend hours in the classroom and practically live in the library. But, some of the most valuable lessons come from time spent in the community.

Twice a month, Deann Paulson, a second-year medical student, joins others to provide care and education to women who have been victims of domestic violence. They conduct free health care screenings and educational seminars at the YWCA Omaha.

“Our goal is to empower the women through knowledge of their personal health,” Paulson said.

The North Bend, Neb., native is one of approximately 160 students taking part in activities made possible by the new Interprofessional Service Learning Academy at UNMC, which engages future health professionals in supervised, community-based learning experiences to address community-identified needs.

“Students are exposed to community organizations and analyze real-world problems to develop projects that fill a distinct need,” said Ruth Margalit, M.D., founder and director of the Interprofessional Service Learning Academy. “This is an expansion of the traditional classroom where our community partners become co-teachers with traditional faculty.”

It is more than volunteer work, Dr. Margalit said, as each project is tied to course objectives and incorporates critical reflection and a research component. “Service learning is both a philosophy and a teaching methodology,” she said. “Students make connections between what they are learning in the classroom and what they experience through service.”

Administered in the College of Public Health, the Service Learning Academy brings together undergraduate and graduate level students from UNMC’s college’s of nursing, public health, medicine, pharmacy and the School of Allied Health Professions to:

- Facilitate collaborative partnerships between the university and local organizations;
- Enhance student learning;
- Promote personal and professional development including creativity, leadership and professionalism;
- Improve community health; and
- Foster civic engagement and social justice awareness among students and faculty.

The YWCA project is one of a handful of UNMC projects determined to make a difference across the Omaha landscape.

Twenty-five faculty advisers participate in the interprofessional, intercampus projects that, this year, engage students with community partners such as The Nebraska AIDS Project, the Siena Francis House homeless shelter, the Douglas County Department of Corrections, City Sprouts and the Heartland Equine Therapeutic Riding Academy.

For Paulson, the service-learning project has been as valuable to her as it has been to the women it serves. “I’m learning life lessons that nobody can teach – lessons that can’t be learned until you try and fail and try again,” she said.

Her group’s next goal: Expand education and screening programs with clinical services that provide women greater access to screenings (Pap smears) and acute care.

Ellen Freeman Wakefield, chief operating officer at the YWCA Omaha, applauds the students’ efforts saying: “This project has the potential to become both a major program for underserved women in this community and an important part of the service learning program at UNMC.”

Students who choose health professions have strong ideals and the intent to make a difference while serving others, Dr. Margalit said. “The service-learning experience allows them early on to realize these pursuits.” 