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Celebrating our volunteers during National Volunteer Week

During National Volunteer Week from April 18 to 24, the University of Lethbridge is celebrating the efforts of all volunteers, including our staff, faculty and students, who continue to offer their services during the pandemic.

“This pandemic has really highlighted a lot of the inequities in our social structure and gaps in care,” says Dr. Shelly Wismath, dean of the School of Liberal Education. “In some ways, there’s a greater need for volunteers than ever, but it has to be done differently with careful attention to health and the need for distancing.”



During the past year, U of L students have been volunteering their time with Volunteer Lethbridge’s Keep in Touch program that allows volunteers to connect with isolated seniors by phone. Others, like Nicholas Canning, this year’s UVolunteer program coordinator, have given their time to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Lethbridge and District for their GameOn program where volunteers facilitate digital support groups for youth. Other opportunities are national or even international. Through an app called Be My Eyes, a sighted volunteer can help a blind or low-vision user check expiry dates, read instructions or navigate new surroundings through their smartphone.

As might be expected, the total number of hours U of L students volunteered over the past year decreased, largely because many students were not in Lethbridge. Even so, U of L students contributed 922 volunteer hours during the 2020-2021 academic year. The economic value of their work is more than \$19,000.

“It’s really challenging what we’re going through right now and, as a community, it’s easy to become consumed by the negative,” says Canning. “But what the world needs now is love, and volunteering is a good way to do that. It’s beneficial to the recipient and it’s really impactful to have something to look forward to and have something to do on a regular basis.”

Canning, a third-year Dhillon School of Business student majoring in human resource management, has been involved in volunteering from a young age. As UVolunteer coordinator, he contacted student clubs and the Graduate Students' Association to generate excitement around volunteerism, and helped develop a new online platform to link volunteer postings and non-profit organizations. His creativity was put to the test as he's had to think of creative ways to engage students and develop virtual volunteer opportunities.

"If you go to a non-profit organization and tell them what you're interested in, they'll find a way to make it work," says Canning. "I have students doing Google Analytics marketing. Volunteering can be professional development. For students, there are so many reasons to volunteer, including employers being more likely to hire someone with volunteer experience. Volunteering is definitely a two-way street. It's a win-win."

That was certainly the case for U of L students Precious Owuso-Ware, Nashania Patel and Wael Nasser.

"It is fulfilling for me to serve a noble cause," says Owuso-Ware. "It gives me that sense of achievement, giving back and applying myself in the community."

"There is something about being able to give that brings a smile to my face," says Patel. "It has increased my self-confidence."

"Volunteering made me deeply involved in dialogue around the issue of homelessness in Lethbridge," says Nasser.

The U of L has partnered with Volunteer Lethbridge for eight years to promote volunteerism on campus. UVolunteer, administered through the School of Liberal Education, employs a co-operative education student each year to inform students and engage them in volunteer opportunities in the community. Since 2015, U of L students have recorded roughly 11,000 volunteer hours with an economic value of almost \$285,000.

"Our pillars of liberal education include critical thinking, connections across disciplines and a broad education," says Wismath. "The purpose of that is not only to get students good jobs, but to produce good citizens. That means people who are engaged in their community, who look around them and see what could be done better, see what is needed and actually step up and say 'I can help with this.' There's something out there for everyone, whether you're interested in kids, seniors, teaching, pets or the environment. There are a million volunteer opportunities right here on your doorstep."

Find this news release online at [National Volunteer Week](#).

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