

For Cal State San Marcos Alumni & Friends

# steps

WINTER 2016



| *Forward Together*





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## THEORY IN ACTION

**IT** may sound simple – songs loaded on an iPod – but Sean Griser knows simple things can change peoples' lives in meaningful ways.

So when his psychology field research class gave him the opportunity to put the compassionate care practices he was learning to use to improve the lives of patients suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's disease, he jumped right in.

Working with the residents at Sunshine Care, a skilled nursing home in Poway, he

began interviewing patients and their families, asking questions that could help him identify music that connected with their life: military battle hymns, songs from the church choir, the first dance at their wedding, and even folk music from their homeland.

Sean compiled 77 customized playlists, and then pushed play. And the results were powerful.

"I saw patients light up in ways they hadn't in a long time, and I saw music help a patient remember their son and loved ones," he said. "Music has a way of triggering memory and transporting us back to those moments, and I wanted to give that gift to others."

Sean's 15-week project was part of a unique teaching approach known as service learning, which integrates service as a core component of learning.

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Every year, CSUSM students log more than 40,000 hours of service learning. More involved than being a volunteer and different than an internship, service learning combines community service with academic course work, putting otherwise abstract concepts and theories into practice. The result is an experience that benefits both the learner and those they serve.

Though a graduate now, Isabel Manzano can still recite the sociological theories she saw in action.

"When you can see it happening, when



we see how it works outside the pages of a textbook, that knowledge will forever be ingrained in your memory – it stays with you,” she said of her time mentoring at-risk teens at Alta Vista, a continuation high school in the Vista Unified School District.

In her Women and Crime class, Isabel studied the prevalence of gender disparities in the juvenile justice system, and how girls are fundamentally treated differently than boys. During her service learning, she saw that dynamic play out repeatedly. Often, male students

were placed at the continuation school for disruptive behavior or involvement in illegal activities; female

students were most frequently cited for truancy. The reason? Most were teen mothers with unexcused absences that left them behind in school.

“The system isn’t equitable,” she said, “and while I could see the odds stacked against

them, I wanted to give them hope, to be an example, as they found their way back on track. I know it’s hard; I’ve been there.”

At 22 – while in her sophomore year at CSUSM – Isabel had her son, Andres. Juggling the demands of motherhood while working and finishing her degree took perseverance, and she pulled from those experiences to inspire her students to believe in themselves.

“Students are so much more engaged in the learning process, largely in part because people are relying on them to know this information,” said psychology lecturer Dr. Lori Montross, who has been integrating service learning in her courses since coming to CSUSM in 2013.

Montross describes service learning as a cyclical process where students learn, serve and reflect – and then repeat the cycle.

“Reflection solidifies learning,” she said, “and it is that crucial step that truly differentiates service learning.”

“I am not here to just pack my brain with information,” said Connor Leone. “I want to enrich my life and the lives of others, and make a positive impact on this world. And it so rewarding to be able to begin making that impact immediately.”

And immediate it was.

A transfer student from New Jersey, Connor’s first class at CSUSM – environmental sciences – required 30 hours of service learning, something he admits he first overlooked when enrolling in the course. But the experience changed

everything for him.

He recalls often leaving class and going straight to his service learning site, ECOLIFE Conservation, located just minutes from campus, to apply what he learned that same day.

At ECOLIFE, he helped build aquaponics systems, a one-of-a-kind sustainable indoor garden, for K-12 classrooms studying ecosystems and the role of the eco-cycle. The system, which blends hydroponics (the growing of plants in water) with aquaculture (the raising of aquatic species like fish), teaches children about sustainable technologies and alternative ways of growing food.

When the semester ended, Connor stayed connected to ECOLIFE as a volunteer. That involvement grew and eventually led to his current paid position within the nonprofit as the aquaponics education coordinator.

“Education is about teaching citizenry,” Montross said. “Content will change. Technologies that we once thought were cutting edge will become outdated or obsolete. But, when we teach citizenry and encourage students to develop a habit of service and social responsibility to the community, that’s what students retain. And when we do that, everyone benefits.”



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