

Designs on Volunteering

'Expanding Your Horizons' program is one way to fulfill goal of service to society

by Margine Biswas, AIA



THE OPPORTUNITY TO OFFER ONE'S KNOWLEDGE and skills to young people can be an exceptionally rewarding experience. When such an opportunity arose recently, I joined several members of AIA Dallas' Women in Architecture in preparing a presentation for middle schoolaged girls to help them realize their potential for professional careers. Our presentation was part of the national "Expanding Your Horizons" program sponsored by the American Association of University Women.

We gave our presentation on Feb. 28 at Cedar Valley College in Lancaster, one of 16 similar EYH programs held annually across Texas. Around 70 girls in grades six through eight attended, with architecture being one of 11 professions explained and demonstrated in hands-on workshops. In essence, the program encourages girls to continue their studies in math and science by introducing them to exciting career options in specialized topics. Other career fields included veterinary medicine, pediatric health care, microbiology, forensic art, and electronics. The EYH program's main purpose is to demonstrate that these professions can be exciting and are worth pursuing.

The Dallas chapter of Women in Architecture has been volunteering in the local EYH program for several years. My colleagues and I have found that our volunteer service has not only helped a number of deserving students who otherwise may not learn about the many career paths that are open to them. We've also learned that we could benefit from our service, too, because the preparation and teaching keeps us sharp by using our minds in new and creative ways. In addition, our choice of volunteer service offers the chance to network with other professionals working in careers outside of ours. Most of all, by sharing our vision with the girls, we help them understand how good design matters in the creation of buildings and entire communities.

The members of Women in Architecture – Amanda Boers, AIA; Lennie Chamberlin, Assoc. AIA; Patra Philips, and I – represented our profession in Lancaster. We prepared our presentation in the conference room at Omniplan, thanks to Lauren McLain, AIA, who volunteered the firm's facilities. There, we organized our presentation and finalized the drawings and paper cutouts we used to teach the girls about the basics of architectural design.

During our presentation, we showed the girls the different methods of design development, from mass models to construction documents. Their task included choosing among three options—the design of a school, a gym, or a library. We gave them a site plan drawn to scale, with a parking lot as well as roads and contours. The program called for the girls to place the building of their choice within the constraints of the site and the program. The girls

were given walls, cutouts of doors, HVAC rooms, cutouts of furniture, desks, restrooms, trees, etc. We had different material samples, such as carpet, wallpaper, and paint colors. The sessions progressed like mini-studios, with the architects providing guidance about how to place the building on the site and making efficient layouts to reduce cost. The girls were quick to grasp the instructions and readily engaged themselves in responding to the programmatic elements. At the end of our workshop, they presented their designs and explained how they arrived at their solutions.

Volunteering can be very joyful, as long as you put your time and effort into a volunteer project that truly interests you. For example, look first at the organizations that you already support with financial contributions. Or, if you can't find a group that shares your interests, consider starting your own. The only limitation is your own imagination. Perhaps you would like to learn something new. Just be aware that such work might require extra time for training. There is also the option of virtual volunteering, an opportunity to use your computer to help if your time or transportation is limited. Some areas that are always looking for volunteers include museums, art galleries, historic properties, and public parks.

A word of caution: remember not to over commit. Start slow before you commit to something you aren't certain you can finish. Once you've found the right balance, think of your volunteer service as your contribution to society while giving a voice to your heart.

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