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Teen volunteers do a world of good

BY MARY ELLEN PEREIRA

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"There's nothing like helping a person that you'll never meet again," Dennis McElhone said. "It's really fulfilling. There's nothing cooler. It's unconditional love - like paying it forward."

That sums up McElhone's February experience as a volunteer in Ghana, a West African nation that achieved independence from Britain in 1957. McElhone, 18, a senior at Centereach High School, helped complete a school and start on a foundation for an office building with a group of youths and adults from the United Methodist Church of Lake Ronkonkoma. "The locals would help us," he said. "It was a collaborative effort, two cultures coming together for one purpose."

Sarah Graf, 16, also a member of the group, was amazed at how open and accepting the people were. Graf is a junior at Connetquot High School in Bohemia. "It was a totally different experience," she said. "They don't take as many things for granted as we do." In Ghana, brownouts are normal, almost daily occurrences to save power and water. Graf and McElhone stayed with a local family, where they enjoyed bonding with the kids.

High schoolers across Long Island are encouraged to "give back." School community service clubs offer students a wealth of opportunities to reach out to others locally and abroad.

Grooming college applicants

"Guidance counselors and faculty members steer students in the right direction, but most kids are finding these opportunities on their own," said John McNeur, director of music and performing arts for the Herricks school district. "To prepare for college applications, many teens choose to do

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something meaningful with their summers."

College recruiters today want students who have reached out to others.

"Colleges look for kids that have character and are givers," said Lou Sabatini, chairman of the guidance department at Massapequa High School.

Laura Magnus, 18, a senior special-education student at Massapequa High School, was chosen by Lions In Sight, a Vallejo, Calif.-based organization, to join its humanitarian mission to Venezuela. Magnus, who has speech and language disabilities, spent Thanksgiving weekend facilitating eye exams for the needy in Maracaibo and Coro.

"It made me realize how much people need help," Magnus said. "We matched up donated eyeglasses with their prescriptions." This summer she plans to assist the organization in Bala, India.

During the summer, Zachary Fink, 17, a senior at Commack High School, traveled to the Dominican Republic for three weeks with Visions Service Adventures. "I had visited the Dominican Republic two times before, both on family vacations," Fink said. "I was appalled at the living conditions of the children living there. The kids were living in a tin shack with a roof that would have holes in it."

The group worked on building a 40-by-100-foot school in San Luis. "I was fortunate enough to go back and visit the community this past December," Fink said. "The school was scheduled to be operational in March. The time that I had there was one of the best experiences of my life."

Preparation for these trips are rigorous, including a series of vaccinations. But language did not seem to pose problems.

"Those children had nothing, but they were just so happy to have us there," said Diana Broberg, a senior at Division Avenue High School in Levittown. She helped build a school in the village of Winneba, Ghana, in February 2005, with members of the New York Annual Conference of Youth Ambassadors. The village children taught Broberg a few words in Fanti.

Safety issues

The biggest concern for parents here is safety. Zach Fink's dad, Richard, felt secure in the fact that his son was part of a reputable group. "They weren't given the freedom to explore on their own," he said. "I was more concerned with illness - the fear that medical care there might not be like it is here in the U.S."

Willi Rechler, 17, a Jericho High School junior, spent a month last summer in

Cambodia as a volunteer for Putney's Global Awareness in Action. "When you're in a country you learn so much more than just reading about it," Rechler said. She was involved with kids in an orphanage, schools and a hospital, and also interviewed parents. She helped with gardening and food preparation.

While in Cambodia, Rechler shot some video and hopes to make a documentary about health care. "This experience really changed a lot of my values and how I look at people and society in general," Rechler said. She plans to go back this summer to a monastery to catalog the English- language collection of its library and work with children.

"Willi is a true humanitarian," said Debbie Lisa-Brown, her guidance counselor. "She puts time and effort into everything she does because she wants to learn about people."

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