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College student innovates to help others 20-year-old from Nashville founds national grant program



Angela Perkey, 20, a graduate of Martin Luther King Jr. High School, recently started Students Serve, a national nonprofit that provides service-learning grants to college students. **SHELLEY MAYS / THE TENNESSEAN**

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Angela Perkey spent the last month in Washington, D.C., cheerfully grilling 61 members of Congress on who had guided them through life and into the halls of the nation's Capitol.

"I want to be able to share that with as many people as possible," said the 20-year-old college senior from Nashville, who plans to spin those stories into an academic paper or book.

The project was textbook Perkey: She saw a need — she couldn't find any research on who federal legislators considered their mentors — and pounced on it. That's the same M.O. that recently led her to found Students Serve, a national grant program for college students like herself intent on applying their school smarts toward bettering their own community.

"She just realizes there's no substitute for having hands-on work in the community," said her father, 61-year-old Bart Perkey, director of health equality for Metro Public Health Department. "You profit because you learn as a student, but secondly, you gain the satisfaction from knowing how you've made a difference in someone's life."

Perkey's first go at service learning arose through her honors program at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va. The experience of applying and gaining knowledge through volunteerism made a vast impression on the freshman.

"So often we study social problems but we're unable to use the knowledge we learn to benefit the population as a whole," Perkey said. "It seems a waste of time and effort — tuition money, even."

She and six fellow scholars developed a guidebook for the Virginia Department of Health of affordable language resources that health clinics could use when trying to communicate with immigrants with limited English, such as medical dictionaries and interpreter phone services.

"They were able to develop a product that's used throughout the commonwealth by health departments, by all types of health practitioners," said Rene Cabral-Daniels, then the department's director of health policy and planning.

Last summer, with a grant from her honors program, Perkey canvassed a low-income neighborhood — coincidentally, the one around her Nashville alma mater, Martin Luther King Jr. High School — for ways the physical environment could be made more conducive to a healthy lifestyle.

GET INVOLVED

For more information about Students Serve, visit www.studentsserve.org. To donate, mail your contribution to Students Serve, c/o Angela Perkey, 5720 Spring House Way, Brentwood, Tenn. 37027. Perkey can be reached at 661-6022 or angelaperkey@studentsserve.org.

She submitted to the city suggestions like improving access and adding more benches to the park, ensuring sidewalks were wide and well-maintained and improving lighting.

During that time, she reconnected with friends from high school, who expressed interest in doing similar service projects as hers but lacked the means to do them.

Spurred to action, Perkey began poking around, contacting Washington D.C.-based Learn and Serve America, which awards grants to schools and community groups, to ask if there were any programs that did the same for college students with individual projects in mind.

The reply: That was a niche that needed filling.

"So many times a young person has a great idea, and very often, those great ideas wouldn't cost a lot," said Amy Cohen, director of Learn and Serve America. "But for a college student, even \$50 may be more than they can afford to risk on a great way to solve a community problem. So this kind of grant program might enable them to run with a great idea they otherwise wouldn't be able to do."

Perkey went straight to the library and checked out books on starting nonprofits. She filed the articles of incorporation, as well as the IRS papers establishing the nonprofit's tax-exempt status. She recruited around the William & Mary campus for officers, whittling applications down to 10 student volunteers who handle fundraising, communications grant-writing and technology issues.

A grant of nearly \$1,000 from mtvU and Youth Venture got them started.

Perkey and her staff have hit the fundraising circuit hard in hopes of collecting up to \$75,000 this year — enough to provide about 25 grants ranging from as little as \$100 to as much as \$3,000. Like all nonprofits, it'll be a perennial challenge. Though they've heard quite a few polite refusals, they've also gotten the thumbs-up enough times to raise about \$6,000 so far.

Students Serve set their first deadline for grant applications for earlier this month, advertising on sites such as FastWeb, a popular and free online scholarship searches. The project proposals rolled in from around the country, including California, New Hampshire, Florida, Texas and Tennessee.

Cohen is thrilled Perkey has targeted college students, saying a program like Students Serve encourages community service and may even stimulate long-term community projects.

Money — or rather, a lack of it — can hamper college students from trying out ideas.

But young people have valuable solutions and unique perspectives to offer because of their age and life experiences, Cohen said.

Young people just like Perkey.

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