



DO GOOD, FEEL GOOD

Lauzon at the UVic Student Society Food Bank, with student volunteers Laura Janssen (centre) and Ashley Stewart. PHOTO: DIANA NETHERCOTT.

UVic students learn first-hand how helping others changes lives, including their own

BY KIM WESTAD

Dr. Lara Lauzon's office looks like that of many a hard-working professor—jammed bookshelves, thank-you cards on the window sill and final exams stacked in piles.

And then there are the boxes of food.

These are not so typical, but the tins of soup, fruit, jars of peanut butter, crackers and other non-perishables are evidence of students having taken the lesson of “giving back”—a key component in a unique course taught by Lauzon—to heart.

All the food was donated by Lauzon's students during final exams, and is destined for the University of Victoria's Food Bank. There, from a small room tucked in the basement of the Student Union Building, students in need can count on finding the basics to feed themselves.

This holiday giving is in addition to the Community Legacy volunteer projects students did as part of course work in EPHE 142, “Personal Health, Wellness and Potential,” a first-year course in the School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education, where Lauzon is a professor.

The course features an element that is a bit out of the comfort zone for many students, but often ends up a life-changer—they must all volunteer in the community. The projects must be done in groups—so that students learn to work co-operatively with others, often strangers—who then go out to do good and make a difference.

“Frankly, many students are not keen on the idea at the start. However, those students are often the ones who end up liking it the most,” says Lauzon. “It takes students out of themselves, out of their own world and into the bigger one around them.”

The project acts as a catalyst for social and community connection, says Lauzon, who has taught the course for 15 years and has seen its popularity grow dramatically. A class of 130 usually has dozens more students on the waitlist.

The legacy projects have seen students clean beaches, help with a blood bank, pull ivy and broom from parks, serve food at Our Place, help at seniors' homes, and gather hundreds of kilos of food for the UVic Food Bank and the Mustard Seed Food Bank in downtown Victoria.

The importance of this required project

became clear after Lauzon and colleague Joan Wharf-Higgins studied the impact of EPHE 142 on the wellness practices and health concerns of UVic students.

They discovered that many students had a strong desire to feel a sense of belonging and did want to make a contribution to society. The curriculum for EPHE 142 was revised to serve students from across all disciplines and the focus on helping others became an even more important part of the course.

“Volunteering makes you see the world and fellow humans in a more compassionate way,” says Lauzon, who plans to do further research on the impact the volunteer projects have on the students and the community.

“The research shows that by helping others, we start living with a little more gratitude and that is a terrific lesson for anyone.”

Giving to the community is more top of mind during the holiday season and into the New Year, but relatively easy to do all year-round, adds Lauzon. “One of the things students found was that even with their courses, studying, part-time jobs and creating a future, they still had time to help others. We all do.”

EDGEWISE

Many of Lauzon's students were unfamiliar with food banks, or surprised with the number and breadth of people who use them. According to a Food Banks Canada study, more than 850,000 people across the country rely on a food bank every month. Of those, 24 per cent are families with children, and four in 10 are single parents.

Want to make a food donation? The Mustard Seed food bank (625 Queens Ave.) is open for donations Monday to Friday, 8 a.m.–5 p.m., Saturdays 9 a.m.–4 p.m. The UVic Food Bank (room B017, Student Union Building), run by the UVic Students' Society, reopens Jan. 6 and is open from 2–4 p.m. for donations. You can also drop off food at the UVSS office, near Cinecenta, Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Lauzon's research interests include human wellness, health and fitness, and workplace wellness. She is a popular volunteer speaker for the UVic Speakers Bureau, giving presentations to community groups on a wide range of health and wellness topics. Visit bit.ly/uvicspeakers

Lauzon is also co-author of the textbook, *An Invitation to Health*, which is used in health classes across North America. Among its lessons are 17 profiles of students who have personally dealt with health and wellness issues. Eleven of those profiles are of UVic students.

Meet Lara Lauzon at bit.ly/laralauzon

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