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Mutual benefits

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Mutual benefits

When Tara Marker isn't playing midfield for the Furman soccer team, pursuing her self-designed major in psychophysics or working on a summer research project, she's doing her best to get her teammates off campus and into a world that stretches the boundaries of their comfort zones.

A few years back, she and a few fellow soccer players had been doing volunteer work at nearby Berea High School as well as a local nursing home. But Marker sensed that nobody was getting the full benefit of the exchange — neither the players nor the people they were assisting.

"I didn't feel like I or the other girls were getting a lot out of it," says Marker, a senior. "And that was true of the people we were visiting, too. We couldn't seem to make a connection. So I wanted to find another group of people we could help."

Marker went to the phone book and found the name of the Greenville County Disabilities and Special Needs Board, an organization that provides services to local residents with developmental disabilities, both mental and physical. She then called and offered the team's services for the 2004-05 school year.

"I told her right up front that it wouldn't be easy," says Reams O'Neal, director of quality assurance and training for the Disabilities and Special Needs Board. "The people in our program have limited verbal skills and varying degrees of disabilities. A lot of people don't do well volunteering in that environment. But Tara and the rest of the girls did a tremendous job. It meant a lot to us to have that contact with Furman."

The project by Marker and the Lady Paladin soccer team is just one example of community involvement by Furman student-athletes. Beginning in 2004-05, Furman teams made a concerted effort to volunteer their time and services, and all 17 sports were involved in a variety of community service projects throughout the year. Danny Marshall '04, a former Paladin placekicker, coordinated the effort.

The football team, for instance, helped construct a Habitat for Humanity house, and the men's and women's golf teams provided free clinics and lessons at Greenville's First Tee, a development program for youth. The baseball team

Furman teams embrace opportunities for community involvement



Autumn Sullivan '07 and a friend visit a resident of Oakmont Nursing Home in Greenville. Sullivan, a sprinter on the track team, is from Charlotte, N.C.

tutored children at Duncan Chapel Elementary School, and the men's tennis team did the same at Armstrong Elementary School. The track and field teams even picked up puppies every week at the Humane Society on their way to visit children in local hospitals.

"We feel it is important for our students to be involved in both the university community and the community at large," says Gary Clark '74, director of athletics. "Participating in service projects gives them a good sense of what their responsibilities are beyond the playing field and the classroom. We believe it is a vital part of their overall education."

According to Marker, the soccer team's involvement with the Disabilities and Special Needs Board provided the "connection" she and her fellow players had been wanting. Although the people they visited each week had a variety of developmental disabilities, including mental retardation, autism, and traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries, they had no problem communicating.

They played cards together, put together puzzles and generally did whatever the residents of the house wanted to do. They attended a Christmas party at one of the houses, where they sang karaoke and danced. Marker also provided free tickets to Furman football and soccer games, which the residents loved. It wasn't long before Lady Paladin soccer

posters were plastered throughout the houses they were visiting.

"The people in our program were always asking me, 'When are those girls coming back?' " O'Neal says. "Things couldn't have gone better."

Furman athletes are clearly having a positive impact in the community. Julius van de Laar, a junior basketball player from Heidelberg, Germany, regularly visited local elementary schools with other members of the team. They would talk to the children about their daily schedules — "so they would know they weren't the only ones who had to do homework" — and discuss the importance of doing well in school.

"Some of the students would come to our games and hang around afterward," van de Laar says. "I would take them to the locker room and get players to sign autographs for them. It was nice to know we had made enough of an impression on them that they would want to come and watch us play."

In the end, however, Marker believes it is the student-athlete who benefits the most.

"That was my one goal, to get people out of the Furman 'bubble' and realize that there is a whole different world just outside the gates," she says. "It gives you a deeper appreciation for where you are and the things you have."

— Vince Moore