

how to "do it right" is evidenced by the success of the 24 projects they undertook during the 1997-1998 school year.

These student-directed activities are done in conjunction with organizations such as the Black United Fund, the Interfaith Council for the Homeless of Union County, St. Bartholomew the Apostle Roman Catholic Church in Scotch Plains, the Fanwood Presbyterian Church, the Scotch Plains Welfare Department, Women, Infants and Children of Plainfield, the Scotch Plains Business and Professional Association, and the Ashbrook Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Scotch Plains.

Expectations for members' participation in DECA activities are high. Students come into the club recognizing that its success, and theirs, are directly linked to the level of involvement of each member.

Club members meet as needed, usually before school at 7:30 a.m., to ensure that ongoing projects run smoothly.

"Students are the driving force behind everything getting done," said senior Paul Valenzano.

It was the business aspect of DECA that drew Paul into the club. He called DECA "a good experience from an organizational point of view."

"You can't beat the community activities, for future references as well as experience," he added. "It's simply a good feeling to help out people."

And help they do.

DECA students visit the Ashbrook Nursing and Rehabilitation Center once a month to celebrate residents' birthdays. In addition to bringing gifts, refreshments and, sometimes, entertainment, students provide welcome companionship for the senior citizens there.

Keenly aware of how eagerly the seniors look forward to their regular visits, students frequently use their lunch break from work to spend time with the Ashbrook residents.

The annual Thanksgiving Dinner, sponsored in conjunction with the Black United Fund and other social agencies, is an eight-year tradition which ranks among DECA members' favorites.

The 1997 dinner treated 180 area residents to a traditional sit-down Thanksgiving feast at the United Fund offices in Plainfield. Dinner included 30 turkeys and lots of leftovers for the guests.

"The dinner supplies food and a place for people to be," explained Rianna. "It gives people without a family a place to come for the holiday."

"The Thanksgiving dinner is my favorite," declared Paul. "It means close interaction with the people we're helping all year long...(a chance) to see their smiles when they come in to sit down for dinner."

In conjunction with preparations for the Thanksgiving dinner, DECA members conduct their traditional canister drive, a practice they've maintained for 27 years.

The money they raise is used exclusively for food — to subsidize the Thanksgiving dinner, as well as to prepare approximately 120 food baskets for needy families.

Working with Fanwood Presbyterian and St. Bartholomew's churches and the Scotch Plains Welfare Department, students personally deliver many of the baskets.

During the year, students work with the Interfaith Council for the Homeless of Union County to assist 60 to 70 area families who are temporarily without housing.

Because these families have little to share around the holidays, students conduct a toy and clothing drive, seeking financial assistance from local merchants and residents.



HELPING THE COMMUNITY...Members of the award-winning Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School DECA display a portion of the food they purchased following a successful canister drive to benefit the needy. The project was one of many community activities conducted by the marketing students throughout the year.

For the past five years, DECA has organized an "Adopt-a-Family" program, which assisted 70 families in 1997, including 20 referred by the Welfare Department. Approximately 48 of these families were adopted by local businesses, organizations and friends of DECA, while the remainder were taken up by the student marketing association itself.

Under the "adoption" program, families prepare a wish list of things they need and want, and the adoptive business or organization does its best to brighten the holidays by filling the list.

Response to last year's program was so overwhelming that a bus had to be rented to transport all the items, which filled the vehicle from floor to ceiling. Gifts were distributed at a holiday party or hand-delivered to individual families.

To challenge students to employ their marketing know-how to improve the local business district, DECA works closely with the Scotch Plains Business and Professional Association on a major annual market research project.

In the spring of 1997, their efforts gave rise to the Scotch Plains Business and Services Directory, a comprehensive listing of civic organizations, local businesses, a history of Scotch Plains, public school information and ministerial associations, plus a directory of municipal officials.

DECA students also participate in the Planning Committee for the community's annual Scotch Plains-Fanwood Memorial Day Parade.

In addition to raising funds to purchase the small American flags which are handed out to citizens along the parade route, student emcees in Scotch Plains and Fanwood provide running commentary on the parade as it passes through the towns.

Another opportunity for DECA students to work alongside township officials is a cooperative Youth in Government program with Scotch Plains. Each year, approximately 10 students are selected to attend an agenda planning session and regular public meeting of the Scotch Plains Township Council.

Sitting in for the Mayor and council representatives for a meeting, students traditionally display poise and self confidence as they manage the televised public meeting from the municipal offices of the township.

DECA is well-connected with a variety of area business owners who are eager to provide part-time employment to Scotch Plains and Fanwood students.

Over the years, Sears, one of the more popular places to work among students, has evolved into a major training station. Other businesses affiliated with DECA include CVS, Gap Kids, Nirvana and Sealfons, as well as some law offices.

Students have the option of working through DECA to obtain an interview with a prospective employer, or they can go out on their own to secure a job. Members frequently use their employers as the subject of their market research project in preparation for competition.

During their second year of DECA involvement, students are required to produce a 30-page written report on the results of a market research project designed to improve certain aspects of a business.

Students then take their projects and enter them into competition with other DECA chapters.

Competition also includes subjective and objective testing of students' marketing proficiencies. Objective testing challenges students to prove their understanding of the marketing theory they have studied in class.

Subjective skills are tested by the students as they review case studies with a business professional. Students are evaluated on their ability to deal effectively with real-life situations.

This is an important skill to develop, according to former DECA members, who maintain that today's employers frequently use role-playing exercises to teach employees how to respond appropriately in a business situation.

Students agree that the skills they acquire during their DECA experience will serve them well, regardless of what job or career opportunity they elect to pursue once their schooling is completed.

Given the full schedule DECA students are asked to maintain, last-minute preparations clearly would not get the job done.

A lot of people in and around Scotch Plains and Fanwood rely on DECA's trademark enthusiasm and proven ability to successfully plan and implement its year-long calendar of worthwhile projects.





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