DASH teacher gets 'A' for inspiring students to help homeless

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Brooke Scarry, left, and Halley Bohm, both 15-year-old 10-graders at Design and Architecture Senior High, attend a ceremony honoring their former teacher Zudannie Nuñez-Hernandez, at the school in Design District, Wednesday, Oct. 29, 2014. Nuñez-Hernandez received an award for "outstanding work in inspiring students to be active and engaged citizens" from the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.   DANIEL BOCK/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

For Zudannie Nuñez-Hernandez, community outreach is an extension of herself. So it was inevitable that public service became an extension of her classroom as well.

Nuñez-Hernandez emphasizes civic responsibility in her world history and humanities classes at Design Architecture Senior High, better known as DASH. Last year, the approach inspired her ninth-grade students to take on a service project that fed meals to more than 2,370 people in need.

Her efforts to instill activism did not go unnoticed. For her work, Nuñez-Hernandez was presented with the first ever Ethical Governance Day teacher award from the Miami-Dade County Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.

Nuñez-Hernandez, 33, received the award last week at a presentation in her honor at DASH, 4001 NE Second Ave. in Miami, attended by 125 students from last school year.

"She is a teacher that is not only building student minds, but also awareness of community needs and future leaders," Assistant Superintendent Iraida Mendez-Cartya said at Wednesday s presentation.

This proclivity for public service is deeply ingrained in Nuñez-Hernandez. She says she spent her childhood collecting cans, creating clothing drives and passing out fliers with her mother.

"I grew up understanding you are supposed to help others," Nuñez-Hernandez said. "It s part of who I am, and I think that has made a huge impact on how I teach."

She tells her classes that she cannot ignore people s welfare.

When a massive earthquake devastated Haiti in 2010, Nuñez-Hernandez felt compelled to help. At the time, she was a teacher at Ponce de Leon Middle School in Coral Gables and mobilized her students to collect five tractor-trailers full of relief supplies to donate to a ravaged orphanage in Haiti.

"The students were able to leave a legacy with the project," she said.

Since she joined the DASH faculty last year, Nuñez-Hernandez has continued to teach students to identify those in need and come up with solutions that strengthen the community.

"I teach them that there have always been problems, but it is how we deal with them is what makes us a successful community," Nuñez-Hernandez said.

The message became a call to action for the students.

Freshmen making their first commute to the Miami magnet school were exposed to homelessness on their daily travels. With their teacher s lessons in mind, the students resolved to help.

The homeless population is hard to count, but the Florida Council on Homelessness reported 3,734 people living on the streets or in shelters in Miami-Dade County in 2013.

"Some of the students encountered homelessness for the first time," Nuñez-Hernandez said. "Others have those connections to homelessness; maybe they know someone, and those connections are what made this project real."

They decided to partner with Camillus House, a Miami charity that provides human services to the homeless, to set up monthly meal pickups from the school. Students brought in frozen casseroles to class, which Camillus House distributed to more than 800 families.

"We opted to do something the students could do at home with their families," Nuñez-Hernandez said.

Students took full ownership of the initiative, she said. They committed to spreading awareness through creating posters, a video and an original song.

"It meshed perfectly to help these students build leadership while providing service," Nuñez-Hernandez said.

Kourtney Lohn, 15, worked on a video with four other students to depict the impact homelessness has on the city. She says they took photos and did research to create a more compelling final cut.

"We were very self-motivated," Kourtney said. Nuñez-Hernandez "wanted to make the project very student oriented."

Kourtney says the project helped her recognize her interest in public service.

"I personally always wanted to be part of charity work but never had," she said. "Working with the Camillus House helped make me realize this is what I want to continue to do."

To increase the aid, the student team decided to enter a national competition to feed the hungry known as the Lead2Feed Student Leadership Challenge, created by USA Today Charitable Foundation and Lift a Life Foundation. More than 850 schools competed in the challenge for grant prizes to donate to local hunger relief charities.

Despite a late start months after other schools, Nuñez-Hernandez and her classes were

awarded second place and given $5,000 to donate to Camillus House.

"We really were not expecting it," Nuñez-Hernandez said.

Nuñez-Hernandez is quick to give her students all of the credit, but former student Brooke Scarry, 15, says that it was their teacher s enthusiasm that inspired their commitment.

"She spearheaded this on her own," Brooke said. "She was the only teacher to take on this big initiative."

Principal Stacey Mancuso also praised Nuñez-Hernandez s drive at the award presentation.

"It is hard to come into a new school and make a big impact," Mancuso said.

Nuñez-Hernandez s hope is that the project s response has taught her students that a small initiative can have a profound impact.

"I hope that I have planted that seed of philanthropy in each and every one of you and that when you leave DASH you spread that even farther," she told the students.