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A Hokie Nation of servant leaders

By John Dooley

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The many images of Virginia Tech are striking: the HokieBird and Hokie Stone; the Drillfield and the Duck Pond; CHARLI the robot and a Corps of Cadets with a fantastically high commissioning rate. So many vivid pictures.

I would submit one image trumps all others for the Hokie Nation: of Hokies, around the globe, practicing a central value of service, as expressed in the motto *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve) and consummated through the university's mission of engagement. It is this value that inspires and connects our faculty, staff, students and alumni to dedicate themselves to making differences in the lives of others and in communities.

Entering this special time of year, when so many in society reach out to others, calls to mind the Tech community's countless instances of demonstrating a commitment of service throughout the year. A good example is a pedestrian-bridge project in the mountainous Haitian village of Ti Peligre. There, children needed safe passage across a treacherous river to reach school during rainy seasons, when rising floodwaters blocked access not just to their school, but to markets and medical care. Many villagers drowned.

Hearing of their plight, a dozen Tech students designed and helped build a 200-foot bridge. They worked with the faith-based community in Blacksburg to raise money, and they founded a campus chapter of Bridges to Prosperity for technical help.

With them every step of the way was Bryan Cloyd, a professor in the Pamplin College of Business, who lost his daughter, Austin, on April 16, 2007, and who, along with his wife, Renee, was central to founding VT-ENGAGE. He had set the goal of building a bridge in Ti Peligre after having helped construct an elementary school there.

In Ti Peligre, villagers celebrated with a brass band during the bridge's dedication last spring. One resident told students he was so happy he wished he could open up his heart to show the joy inside. At least one Ti Peligre resident credited the bridge with saving her life. She was rushed across it on what she thought would be her deathbed from cholera, and a waiting ambulance whisked her to the hospital. (Thanks to a \$100,000 donation secured through Blacksburg Rotary, two more bridge projects in Haiti are in the works.)

The Pilot Street Project is another example — one well known to readers of The Roanoke Times. More than 100 Tech students travel to Roanoke each week to teach classes and provide after-school and other assistance to refugees from Somalia, Rwanda, Sudan and elsewhere.

Building on the program, students Katherine Lodge, from Centreville, and Brittany Gianetti, from Oneida, N.Y., created the Coalition for Refugee Resettlement to focus on families whose other assistance has run out. The pair won the governor's Volunteerism and Community Service Award. Equally satisfying to the young women, though, were the personal benefits they discovered from the work. As Gianetti put it, "It's exciting to see how relationships evolve over time, as communication and social barriers are broken down."

Hokies throughout the world are engaged in projects that improve life for others while providing profound enrichment to the givers and doers. Case in point: While working toward two bachelor of science degrees, Austin Larowe serves as chief executive officer of Feed by Seed. He founded the nonprofit organization after

a trip to Zambia with Future Farmers of America. Feed by Seed provides technical assistance and money to developing countries.

Tech students raise six-figure sums for cancer research annually through the Relay for Life, and students are among the almost 7,000 volunteers who complete some 1,000 projects in New River Valley communities during each year's Big Event. Annually, more than 3,000 students take part in "service learning" volunteer projects locally that marry academics with the ideals of civic engagement.

These activities are a two-way street. Students of Kris Tilley-Lubbs in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences are struck by how much they learn from the Latino families in Roanoke whom they interact with, part of a course called Crossing the Border Through Service-Learning.

At Tech, people connect with the desires of others; they think big. Just as Tech students are known to have passed through a rigorous academic experience during their campus years, increasingly a Tech degree also carries with it a civic-engagement stamp.

So when you think of Tech, by all means think of the towering landmark Burruss Hall, the Hahn Horticulture Garden, the Hume Center for National Security and Technology, the Highty-Tighties and more. But please also think of *Ut Prosim* and the Virginia Tech dedication to making an impact, to assisting but also empowering those who are assisted, to achieving transformation through servant-leadership and mutual respect.

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