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Wheeling University impacts teens at Mulholland Center

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From Staff Reports

WHEELING — Thanks to Wheeling University assistant professor Jane Neuenschwander and her students, the region's juvenile offenders are receiving some additional academic help and mentoring — and the juveniles aren't the only ones who learn life-changing lessons in the process.

Neuenschwander and a group of education and criminal justice students from Wheeling University first began making weekly visits to the Ronald C. Mulholland Juvenile Correctional Center in 2016. Initially, the weekly sessions began as a book club to help improve the teens' reading and comprehension skills. Eight semesters later, Neuenschwander and her students' "book club" has evolved into a multi-disciplinary learning experience that combines tutoring, creative problem-solving and meaningful communication.

"When I first met the Center's chief counselor, Lara Williams, we started this program as a happy accident. It's continued because we found a real passion in connecting with these kids. Many of them have unfortunately not had very many positive role models in their lives, so the impact that our students make there is more than just academic," Neuenschwander explained.

The program provides service learning and authentic experiences for the Wheeling University students. Neuenschwander explained, "They (WU students) see that these kids are just like other children, but they happened to end up in the wrong situation, or they got dealt a bad hand in life. It helps the future students be more patient with all students, and to realize that when a child is acting up in class, there is often more to it than simply seeking attention."

"Going to the Mulholland Center has really opened my eyes to see the reality that not everyone had the same experiences I did growing up. We see the challenges that some teens face in today's society," said junior Audrey Francis.

Junior Jennifer Richmond agrees. "Going to the Center each week has really made me aware of classroom management. It's taught me to be more patient and aware of emotional and behavior issues that students might have. Teaching at the Mulholland Center has opened my eyes to the responsibility we have as teachers to not let students fall through the cracks."

Since autumn of 2016, Neuenschwander and her students have contributed more than 1,000 hours of service to the boys and girls at Mulholland. In addition to reading, studying current events, and tutoring, Wheeling's students also lead the teens in group projects. Her students recently built Rube Goldberg machines, which encouraged the kids to get creative and work together, while also exploring lessons in physics, design, and cause and effect.

Neuenschwander said serving the residents of Mulholland is making a lasting impact on her students. Some Wheeling students have attended Mulholland's monthly "family meal" night, where they spend their own free time with the kids whose families are unable to visit them on that day.

Two of Neuenschwander's former students who volunteered at the Center are teaching there now. Ryian Burson, WU class of 2018, has been hired to teach math. During his college years, Burson tutored teens at the Center to help them pass their high school math equivalency tests. Also, a student from Wheeling University's Accelerated Certification for Teachers program, Joshua Fordham, is teaching English/language arts.

Junior Lexie Weisend said serving the students at Mulholland has made her see that being in a traditional classroom setting isn't the only option for teachers. "I now know I have another career option, one which I wouldn't have considered two semesters ago."

"What started out as an experiment back in 2016, has evolved today into a program that has touched everyone's heart," Neuenschwander said.