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Mater Dei High School students make impact in community

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Mater Dei High School senior Nick Ault, 17, of Middletown is a busy kid.

He volunteers for Breast Friends Forever and the Rainbow Foundation, two township nonprofit organizations that benefit breast cancer patients and sick children, respectively.

He plays three sports and is a full-time student. But to hear him say it, keeping a busy schedule isn't that big of a deal.

"You find time to do stuff," he said. "You find things to do along the way."

Ault is involved in the school's Fide et Fortitudine (Faith and Fortitude) Merit Scholar Program, which promotes leadership and volunteer service.

Principal Steve Sciarappa said about 10 percent of the approximately 400 students, mostly freshmen, are involved in the Merit Scholar program, which he described as an "honors-level service program."

At the Catholic school, all students must complete 20 hours of service every school year as part of their graduation requirements.

The Merit Scholar program, open to all students, takes that idea to the next level, Sciarappa said.

The hope is that kids find programs they are passionate about, and "up the bar" each year, he said.

Students who are accepted into the Merit Scholar program through an application process are given a tuition stipend to cover a quarter, half, three-quarters or all of their tuition, depending on their level of involvement.

For example, over the next 18 months, one student will archive the history of Mater Dei and the nearby St. Mary Elementary School. Others volunteer in retirement and rehabilitation facilities, assist local sports leagues, or help with clothing drives.

Seniors Paula Pilipovic of Middletown, Matt Erickson of Red Bank and John Caddock of Atlantic Highlands, all 17, are involved in several kinds of service and extracurricular works. But their

largest accomplishment is the creation in 2007 of HelpLight NJ, a nonprofit organization that distributes energy-efficient light bulbs to senior citizens and families in need. The group aims to reduce people's energy costs and to make an environmentally sound impact.

The students have distributed more than 100,000 bulbs. Their goal of 140,000 bulbs would save close to \$20 million in energy costs, Pilipovic said.

The organization has spread to 15 other schools throughout the state, where students have set up their own HelpLight branches to get the bulbs into areas that the Mater Dei HelpLight crew may not be able to reach.

"When you go to one of the places, you actually see the results of what you're doing. People have said to us, "This is great, I don't have to use candles anymore," " Caddock said.

Pilipovic said the organization has also served as a model, to show that anyone can make a change in the world if they put the effort into it.

"If we can give out 140,000 light bulbs, (and) save . . . \$20 million in electrical bills, what can another three people do?" she said.

Each student must keep a detailed portfolio of their projects, meant to assist them further when they apply to colleges.

Students who graduate after four years of participation in the program will receive a special diploma. Those who participate from one to three years receive special recognition.

"If they are able to stay in the program, they will graduate with a unique diploma (and) have a real-life meaningful portfolio as (their) college application," Sciarappa said.



Seventeen-year-old Nick Ault (center) is raising money for St. Mary's Church. From left: John Caddock, 17; Ault and Caitlin Ault, 16, wait on customers Pat Gibson and her daughter Margaret, 8, of the New Monmouth section of Middletown in an October file photo. (STAFF PHOTO: TOM SPADER)