

Smitherman Recognized as Volunteer of the Year

A Midfield High School student was recognized by the local chapter of Rotary International as its student Volunteer of the Year. Each year, the civic organization honors a retired citizen, an individual in the workforce, and a high school student for their dedication in the area of philanthropy and volunteerism. This year's winner is none other than Midfield's own Alicia Smitherman.

Many readers may be aware of Smitherman's involvement in various clubs at Midfield, such as Key Club and Explorers Club. However, her philanthropic efforts go far beyond the organizations sponsored by the school. Smitherman also founded a non-profit organization that helps partner local food banks and homeless shelters with restaurants and local grocery stores.

Smitherman got the idea for this venture when she was serving with her fellow Key Club members at a soup kitchen over the Thanksgiving holidays last year. When she took a bag of trash to the dumpster in the alley behind the facility, she was shocked to see a food delivery truck emptying its contents into a nearby dumpster. She learned that there had been a mix-up, and a shipment to a neighboring restaurant was duplicated by mistake. Because the food must be kept refrigerated (and the restaurant didn't have the capacity to store it), it had to be discarded.

This encounter sparked Smitherman's idea for her organization, Bridging the Gap. She surveyed local non-profit organizations and homeless shelters to find out about their food needs. Then she approached dozens of local restaurants, bakeries, and grocers about how their unused products could help curtail this need. Now, rather than simply tossing their leftovers or day-old goods, many businesses deliver them to one of these organizations. The shelters and soup kitchens are thankful for the food donations, and the food providers are thrilled to see their resources going to someone who can use them. They just needed someone to point them in the right direction.

"We had talked for years about donating our bread at the end of the day," says Peter Banks of Corner Bakery. "We just didn't know where to do it or how—until Alicia showed us. Now, at the end of the day, we load up all the leftover loaves and pastries, and I drop them off with Margaret, the director at Sharon's Home, a local women and children's shelter. They use them for breakfast and sandwiches for the residents the following day. It's that easy. The shelter is even right on my way home!"

In addition to the regular drop-offs that Smitherman orchestrated, local food providers also contact her when they have unexpected surpluses, like the food truck she encountered that day in the alley. She simply starts calling organizations on her list until she finds someone who can make use of the extra food.

It's easy to see why Smitherman was a natural choice for this award. However, she insists that the focus be on the organization's purpose and not the part she played in it. "I just did what

made sense,” she said. “These people had extra food. Those people needed it. That’s all. I just helped make a way for them to get it.”

Smitherman will receive her award at Rotary’s annual banquet in April.