

Volunteer Spotlight: Sofia Papakostas, JPMorgan Chase + Steppin' Up Yonkers

Small projects can have huge impact. Just ask **Robert Lucas, Executive Director of Steppin' Up Yonkers**, a nonprofit based in southwest Yonkers, New York, that works with public housing residents and others on a range of grassroots community advocacy initiatives.

Last year, the organization asked Pro Bono Partnership for help with memorializing an agreement it had entered into with an organic farm in Orange County, New York, which would allow Steppin' Up Yonkers to provide its clients with fresh organic produce.

The Legal Need

The "Farm Project," as it became known, needed immediate attention and Pro Bono Partnership turned to **JPMorgan Chase's** legal department. **Sofia Papakostas**, a first-year attorney in the Chase Honors Program and a Yonkers resident, responded to the call. As Sofia explained, the opportunity to assist a nonprofit in her own community had a profound impact on her. As a young lawyer, working with Steppin' Up Yonkers allowed Sofia to "directly interact with a client at an early stage in my career. I was able to work with them to understand their needs and deliver a product that not only helped address Steppin' Up Yonkers' immediate needs but helped create a strategy that would let my client grow in the future."

Steppin' Up Yonkers provides six food pantries including its "Angel Food Pantry" located in a low-income, senior citizen housing complex. Although the food pantries already served packaged goods, Lucas wanted to provide his clients with farm-fresh, organic produce. To that end, he had entered into an oral arrangement with an entity that owned an organic farm about 45 minutes away from Steppin' Up Yonkers' headquarters. Lucas next wanted to formally detail each party's obligations with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

The Immediate Impact

The "Farm Project" far exceeded anyone's expectations. In terms of sheer numbers, volunteers harvested approximately 25,000 pounds of fresh organic fruits and vegetables, which Steppin' Up Yonkers distributed through its food pantries to 2,200 households (or approximately 6,000 individuals) from May through November 2014. Because Steppin' Up Yonkers does not have the necessary storage facility, the Food Bank of Westchester permitted Steppin' Up Yonkers to store the produce on its premises. During the first half of the month, when Steppin' Up Yonkers was not operating its food pantries, Steppin' Up Yonkers allowed the Food Bank of Westchester to distribute these fruits and vegetables to the Food Bank's other clients.

The Extended Impact

The benefits of the Farm Project extend far beyond the provision of food. The Farm Project was staffed on a volunteer basis and Steppin' Up Yonkers recruited farm workers from the neighborhoods it serves, using the opportunity to educate its clientele about the benefits of healthy eating, cultivating and farming the earth and providing a safe, fun form of aerobic activity for the adult and youth volunteers. Says Sofia, "one of the reasons I was particularly excited about volunteering for the Farm Project was because it helped educate our youth about sustainable farming while providing healthy foods to those who would not otherwise have access to them. I am particularly fond of the Farmers' Market held by the youth on Fridays at the Downtown Yonkers waterfront."

As word of the Farm Project spread through social media, additional volunteers joined Yonkers residents working on the farm and Steppin' Up Yonkers began to send buses to pick up volunteers from New York City. Poised to begin another season on the farm, Steppin' Up Yonkers is working with another Westchester nonprofit to access monies that Steppin' Up Yonkers will use to set up a job training program centered on the farm. Lucas also envisions expanding the Farm Project in other ways and Pro Bono Partnership provided a volunteer to assist Steppin' Up Yonkers with various intellectual property issues that have arisen.

Volunteer Success

As for Sofia's involvement with Steppin' Up Yonkers, it didn't end with the MOU. She currently volunteers at its food pantries and is discussing a continuing leadership role with Steppin' Up Yonkers. Lucas, puts it best: "What can I say about Sofia other than that she is a delight to work with and has shown herself to be such a passionate and enthusiastic supporter of ours that we're hoping to have her join our board! We should be so lucky as to have her!"

Sofia's efforts have had a profound impact on Steppin' Up Yonkers. The Memorandum of Understanding that Sofia Papakostas drafted for Steppin' Up Yonkers may be, as Lucas put it "the single most important document in our organization's young life."