

# New Haven Register

## Yale volunteers bridge 2 worlds

### 3,000 undergraduates venture into city as mentors, role models

By Ed Stannard  
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NEW HAVEN — Diana Damrosch, Yale class of '08, is looking up books in the library — picture books, that is. And it's clear that Damrosch's internship at Vincent E. Mauro Magnet School is about more than reading to third-graders. She's a confidante and a friend.

One boy tells her that he's moving to another town because his parents are divorcing. A girl gives her a huge hug when she arrives.

"I look forward to Diana coming because she's really helpful," says Jennaika Molina, a 9-year-old from West Haven.

Damrosch has also inspired Jennaika to consider being a member of the Yale class of 2021.

"I think it would be a really nice school to go to when I'm older," she says.

Roseann Castiglione, library and media specialist at Mauro, said Damrosch is "a nice role model for them to know that she's from Yale University," but that the kids don't put her on a pedestal.

"She's like a pal," Castiglione said. "They can relate to her and tell her things. She's not as foreboding ... I think it's nice that they can relate those stories to her."

"I would like to go to Yale school because I might meet some of my friends that I met here and I might meet new friends," said Brianna Chockey, 8, of Derby.

As a Yale student intern, Damrosch does more than work with Mauro's students. She's the go-to person who helps connect Yale with the school, nudging other students to volunteer their talents and time.

"We started up some piano lessons for a couple of kids" who otherwise couldn't afford them, she said. She's also brought in a medical student for the Nutrition Detectives program and led the Book Bowl quiz.

Since Mauro will add seventh- and eighth-graders next year, there are also plans to start a track team, using the track at Hill Regional Career High School across the street.

Working with the pupils at Mauro is really the easier job. The challenge is recruiting some of her fellow Yalies.

"The hardest part is I have to do a lot of nagging to keep them accountable," she said.

But Damrosch's presence serves as a bridge between New Haven's two worlds.

"I know this school and I know this community now, so I can answer a lot of questions about this community for Yale students," says Damrosch, 21, a psychology major from Brooklyn, N.Y.

"I love the individual kind of day-to-day things that are going on," she said. "Whenever I go out into the hallway, there's someone who runs up to give me a hug."

Damrosch is one of 3,000 Yale undergraduates who volunteer in New Haven, 70 percent of them in the city schools, according to Claudia Merson, coordinator of public school partnerships in Yale's Office of New Haven and State Affairs.

There are dozens of programs involving Yale and New Haven students, from tutoring to arts and science programs. The Ben Carson Yale University Book Club is affiliated with the New Haven Reads book bank on Bristol Street, offering 135,000 books. Merson called the book bank "nothing short of extraordinary."

#### TIME COMMITMENT

Some of the programs Yale students participate in require a two- or three-year commitment, such as Dwight Hall's Academic Mentoring Program at Wexler/Grant Community School.

Coordinator Bradford Williams said each of the 15 mentors commits to four hours a week, but many put in more than that, bringing the students pumpkin-picking, snow-tubing or to the movies. They've stayed with their students from fifth to eighth grade.

"Really we have a dual focus of the academic time ... getting to know them better and trying to form better relationships with them," Williams said.

One of the mentors, Naeha Chaudhry, said that in addition to trips to the Yale Art Gallery and Peabody Museum of Natural History, she took her student for a tour of the campus.

"I showed her around each of the residential campuses ... she was really impressed with the courtyards," Chaudhry said. "They'll be in high school next year so I think it's really important for them to start thinking about colleges now."

The three-year program has had a notable impact on the students.

"I've seen her work ethic improve the most," said Chaudhry of her student, whose name she didn't want to divulge. "She's done a remarkable job of learning how to be focused."

Not all of the partnerships happen in school. Luther House pairs Yale and city students on Tuesday evenings at Resurrection Lutheran Church on Davenport Avenue.

Jordan Sauer, a Yale junior and one of two coordinators, said about 15 Yale students head over to the Hill neighborhood each week.

"What we try to do is have a one-on-one match up ... so they can have a real relationship," Sauer said.

Mary Dohrmann, a sophomore from Nashville, has learned from her student, too. Jeremiah, a second-grader, needs to talk about his karate class and other events in his life before he can settle down to homework.

"It's important for me to remember before I do my homework to get all the distractions out on the table," Dohrmann said.

#### MENTORS

Some of the kids come whether they need help or not.

Lonnie Jacobs, a fifth-grader at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School, said, "I really do most of my homework at home, so when I get here there's really nothing to do except talk about football."

His mentor, Zach Marks, a junior, pointed out to Lonnie the diorama they worked on together about the solar system and other projects, but added that the two have socialized outside of Luther House. They even boxed together at Ring One.

"It's nice to sort of watch Lonnie turn into a young man," said Marks. "In case he gets in

trouble, I got his cell phone number to track him down.”

Their schedules don't always coincide, though. One Sunday morning, Lonnie gave Marks a call, and woke him up.

Marks said every student should volunteer. “Yale's training the next generation of leaders, so I don't see why they can't be leaders in this community,” he said.

Catherine Sullivan-DeCarlo, spokeswoman for the New Haven schools, said the Yale students who volunteer truly are devoted.

“They tend to stay on sometimes throughout their whole tenure at Yale,” Sullivan-DeCarlo said.

“Overall the partnership has become more aligned to our curriculum and our academic goals and we find that the students offer very valuable one-on-one help ... and they supplement what the teachers are able to offer.”

Claudia Merson said the school programs also help dispel the image of Yalies as wealthy elitists, but she said the image isn't really valid for many students.

“So many of our students are themselves first in family to go to college or from other countries,” she said. And she hailed the “really deep and sustained commitment” the students make and the effect it has on them.

One intern at Mauro went on to become a teacher in the Bronx, taking a low-achieving class to the top academic ranks. He hadn't come to Yale to become a teacher, Merson said.

“He was going to be a lawyer — so he married one instead.”