

2014 Grace K Smith Meritorious Service Award Students

William W. Benson, Clinical student
Leah Dembitzer, School student
Jaclyn Kanrich, School student
Mercedes Okosi, Clinical student

These students were selected by the GSAPP AO Board in conjunction with the GSAPP faculty as examples of organizational leadership inspired by this award. The student and their comments on Organizational Leadership are presented in alphabetical order.



William W. Benson

I feel honored to receive this award and recognition for my volunteerism and involvement in the GSAPP community. For two years, I served as president of the GSAPP Student Alliance and this year serve in an advisory role as immediate past president. I am also a co-leader of the GSAPP Queer-Straight Alliance (QSA). These roles have provided me with an opportunity to see even more clearly how diverse the student body is at GSAPP and how talented and accomplished students are in all kinds of ways. For example, through our QSA potluck meetings, I've learned that many of my colleagues are wonderful cooks (while I rarely get more complicated than boiling water for pasta). I have also learned how as a leader of an organization with many different subgroups or divisions, sometimes your job is to support others to pursue their interests or passions, to provide them with the organization's resources for this purpose, and then to get out of the way and let them lead.

This year, I am sad to have less of an involvement on campus at GSAPP but excited to be pursuing the next chapter in my training. I plan to use this financial award to assist me in applying for APA accredited internships in hospitals and community mental health centers, settings in which I would like to continue to work throughout my career. I hope to use the experience in volunteerism that I have gained at GSAPP to support these institutions as a clinician, an active member of the organizations, and a member of the communities they serve. I want to thank our incredible alumni for this award. I also want to thank them for providing wonderful models for what we students can accomplish in our post-GSAPP careers.



Leah Dembitzer

Volunteer work has always been a part of my life since I was a child delivering homemade meals to elderly people in my community. As I grew older, I began to understand that volunteer work is often just seeing a need and trying to fill it in the best way I could. In GSAPP, I have been honored to be a part of initiatives such as the JSA (Jewish Student Alliance) and the subcommittee of NASP for the APA accreditation of the internship consortium. The biggest gain from engaging in service work has been in connecting to like-minded people who believe that individual actions can make a difference. I learn so much from my friends, colleagues, and mentors who think more of the doing for others than for themselves. I believe that learning about volunteer work our alumni have done can inspire us to think beyond ourselves and our careers and on to the service of our communities and our world.



Mercedes Okosi

Volunteerism has always been an important part of my life because I have experienced a great deal of my own hardships. I have engaged in volunteerism in a variety of settings and various efforts like working at soup kitchens, doing the AIDS walk, helping an organization for disabled women who are survivors of domestic violence, working with an organization that donates books and clothing to low income single mothers, or engaging in activism for issues of women, LGBTQ people, and people of color.

Whether it is one day or an ongoing effort, intentionality means everything, and my intention in the world is to work in service of those people who are disadvantaged and marginalized. I have learned that volunteering can be small or large, from handing a homeless person a sandwich to building one's own nonprofit organization. The real impact of volunteerism is when our actions come from a place of authentic caring for the well-being of other people. During this award year I hope to strengthen the connections between students and faculty at GSAPP and promote open conversation about diversity through my involvement in student groups. I value the connection that GSAPP fosters between its current students and Alumni. This network creates a sense of safety and belonging along the timeline of our professional development. Personally, I maintain contact with my alumni mentor and, as the

President of Black Graduate Students and Allies (BGSA). I hope our Annual Alumni Mixer remains an important tradition.



Jaclyn Kanrich

I have always had a passion for working with people and helping others. My experiences with volunteerism officially began when I was in ninth grade. I began volunteering for an organization called The Challenger Program, which pairs high school-aged students with young children struggling with developmental disabilities. The high school students help the younger children play simple sports and learn appropriate social skills. I was originally paired with a four-year-old boy with ADHD, with whom I worked for the next three years. As a senior in high school, I became a coach for a team within The Challenger Program and was able to work with more children of various needs. Through my participation in this organization, I recognized my passion for working with children and giving back to the community.

As an undergraduate student at The Pennsylvania State University, I was actively involved in the Penn State Dance Marathon, THON, which is a 46-hour dance marathon that helps raise money for children with cancer. THON is also the largest student-run philanthropy in the nation. Through this organization, I volunteered by “canning” and mailing letters to alumni and different businesses to raise money for THON, enforcing rules and regulations during the dance marathon weekend, and motivating dancers to continue their efforts during the dance marathon. As a senior, I had the honor of dancing in THON, which including no sleeping or sitting for the entire 46-hour weekend. Through these experiences, I have solidified my passion for volunteer work, especially working with children and helping youth reach their full potential. A career in the field of school psychology is the perfect fit for me, as I have been able to use my love for volunteerism to help students with diverse needs succeed in school academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.