

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Derek Wallace:

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Claire Ceccoli:

We want to help the community and we also are learning from them. It's a two-way street when you're building these relationships. So doing this sort of work with that mindset of it's a reciprocal learning, this is a mutually beneficial relationship, but at the heart of it all being like, "We're there to help the community," it makes all of this work so rewarding and just natural. It's really, truly a wonderful experience.

John Boccacino:

Since 1994, the Mary Ann Shaw Center for Public and Community Service has proudly served as the university's hub for academic community engagement. Collaborating with students and faculty across campus, the Shaw Center supports community engagement with nonprofits and organizations in and around Syracuse, through service learning and volunteering. The goal? To engage the campus community in the high impact practice of experiential learning, providing institutional leadership through community engagement. As a result, the Shaw Center has a storied history of enhancing the academic experience, research, and the student experience here on campus, while fostering reciprocal campus community partnerships, ensuring students, faculty, and staff feel connected to and engaged with their central New York community.

Later this month, we'll be celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Shaw Center. And on this episode of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast, we are going to hear from two passionate supporters of the Shaw Center, alumnus and entrepreneur Derek Wallace from the class of 2000 and current senior Claire Ceccoli. We're going to start off with having Derek on the podcast. Derek, thanks for making the time to join us today.

Derek Wallace:

I'm proud to join the conversation. Thanks, John.

John Boccacino:

I can tell that engagement and connectivity to your alma mater really means a lot to you. How did you get started with this organization, this group, the Shaw Center, that emphasizes all those key tenets of engagement and civic-minded community service?

Derek Wallace:

Well, I think that the work that the Shaw Center does is so important to me is largely because I'm also from Syracuse originally. I'm from a suburb of Syracuse. I grew up in the community, I understand the position that the university sort of plays in the local economy and the community, all of those things. And I started as a freshman in the policy studies program. And through my work with Professor Bill Coplin, I was introduced to Pam Heintz at the time I was a freshman. And he, after, started working with me, said,

"You really need to go learn about what's going on down at the Shaw center." I think that he recognized that I was driven to do hands-on impactful work.

At that time, I didn't even really know what that would look like, but this professor recommended that I go meet this leader on campus, so I was excited to do it. And the next thing I knew I was signed up to start working on projects at the Shaw Center.

John Boccacino:

When you were a student, then-Chancellor Kenneth Shaw and Mary Ann Shaw, his wife and the Associate of the Chancellor, really made a priority to have student learning be the highest priority at the university, by promoting volunteer service as a fundamental part of the student experience. How did the Shaws and in particular Mary Ann really inspire you to become more involved as a student?

Derek Wallace:

I've been thinking a lot about the Shaws recently, especially as this anniversary is coming up and the impact that their work has had on my life. And what I realized was it was not just my life, it's all of the people like me who were driven to be a part of projects in the community, and then obviously the impact it has on the community. But from when I first met the Shaws, I was a freshman, so I was a bit in awe of the fact that it was the chancellor and the associate to the chancellor, Mrs. Shaw. But I realized really quickly that those may be fancy titles and they may be prestigious roles in higher education, but these were very down to earth people who were trying to make a difference. And they cared about the students, they genuinely cared about the students and they genuinely cared about the surrounding community.

So I think initially, I was a little bit perhaps intimidated by their stature, but really quickly learned that they were truly friends and truly people who were invested in my success, with the success of all of my peers at Syracuse. So from very early on in our work at the Shaw Center, I realized that Mary Ann, Mrs. Shaw would come to the office, she would discuss the projects that we were working on, and most importantly, she would be an advocate and interject and provide support where necessary to get things done, which is really what we needed.

John Boccacino:

What really appealed to you about the tenets and the mission of the Shaw Center?

Derek Wallace:

It was a genuine desire... It fits so well with the policy studies program. You mentioned doing well and doing good, and it fits so well with this drive that I had to want to learn and to want to be a part of implementing new programs and things like that. I wanted to do hard things and I wanted to do impactful things. And it felt to me immediately like that's exactly what we were trying to do, there was a real vision.

And in fact, to some of the points that you made, John, to me, a very innovative vision about how we were going to leverage the skillset of the students in a way that wasn't just learning in a classroom. It was applied learning and skills application outside of the classroom that not only benefited our careers as students, but had the added benefit of building bridges to the community. And I realized that they were going to challenge the status quo a bit and they were going to try new things. And I just thought that that was really impressive and interesting and something that I wanted to apply myself to.

So anything that the Shaws and Pam Heintz wanted to try to do, I just wanted to be a part of it. I wanted to impress them and I wanted to be a leader within it.

John Boccacino:

And what were some of those core activities that you helped to plan and participate in during your time with the Shaw Center?

Derek Wallace:

My first introduction to the Shaw Center was through the Syracuse University Literacy Corps, which I'm proud to say is still thriving today. I was in the first student group of Literacy Corps tutors. So the year between my freshman and sophomore year, that summer, my job was as a literacy tutor in the Syracuse City School District. And it was a brand new program, it was a part of the America Reads challenge. And it was something that was so core to Mrs. Shaw's values as an educator, as a person who cared so much about youth literacy. So I was a part of that group.

And at that time, the center itself was very young, the program was brand new, so we were sort of figuring things out as we went. But at its core, we were in schools. I was working in a kindergarten class over a summer in an inclusive classroom, working with a wide range of different skill sets, including most closely with children with autism, reading to them and getting them excited about literacy. So that was the first project that I worked on at the Shaw Center.

John Boccacino:

What were some of the other ways that you gave back and volunteered through the Shaw Center?

Derek Wallace:

I ended up taking over as the student manager of the Literacy Corps, for one thing, which meant recruiting, training, implementing, working with the city school district, working with our transportation coordinators for us to grow from roughly 14 to 16 tutors to over 100, which was an amazing experience. That's one of the best leadership experiences I've ever had in my life. So I worked on that.

In addition to that, I launched a program that myself and my classmate, Chad Duhon, created called Shooting for A's. And Shooting for A's was an athletic and academic program that invited fifth and sixth grade students from the Syracuse City School district to come to campus and to meet some of their athlete heroes, but then also to learn civics lessons. So for all intents and purposes, we did a program that rewarded achievement in both athletics and academics. So we played basketball with the kids and they learned.

And we launched that program with the support of Pam Heintz and the Shaws and Bill Coplin. It was an innovative program. There were a lot of hurdles to jump because it was brand new. But my work with the Shaw Center really helped both invigorate me, keep me determined, but also navigate some of the political terrain that needed to be navigated to implement it, which was one of my favorite achievements during my Syracuse career.

And then in addition to all of that, we launched programs like the Balancing the Books program in partnership with the Whitman School. It was a service learning, experiential learning program that we created, I helped create through a grant and building a program which is also still on campus today. So those are some of the highlights of the work that we did together, along with, in general, supporting the entire nonprofit community and educational community throughout the Syracuse area.

John Boccacino:

It's really such a mutually beneficial relationship that we form through these service-based efforts. How beneficial was it, the students you're working with, the community members you were engaging with, to see a positive influence from the university, working with them, molding and fostering those relationships? How beneficial was that, do you think for the recipients?

Derek Wallace:

I think that the time that we spent both physically in the community ourselves as representatives and ambassadors of the university, and also inviting members of the community to campus to experience things for the first time and to learn more about what the values of the university were, I definitely, what I saw was a changed perception, both with the kids and with the educators that we worked with, and in understanding that we were genuinely there because we wanted to make a positive impact.

And we recognize and never hid the fact that we really felt like as students we would benefit more than anybody else, but we were driven to do things like teach kids how to read. What is more foundational to an education and the future of someone's life and career than a passion for reading and an ability to do that. And seeing kids develop through not being excited about reading to being so proud of their development, or not being aware of some aspects of our civics and our local community, like who the mayor is and how laws work, to seeing them then start to understand those things to then meeting the mayor when they came to an event that we hosted was just like... What it showed the kids is that they can dream big and they can achieve big. And that's what I believe, and I think that the kids really started to understand that.

John Boccacino:

How did you flourish and develop as a leader through those experiences with the Shaw Center?

Derek Wallace:

It's funny as I'm even talking about some of the work that we did, because I actually did have class too, which is funny. I was managing, I believe it was about 140 students as part of the Literacy Corps. And I was launching the Balancing the Books program and I was managing the Shooting for A's program. And I think what it did was, first of all, it forced me to properly prioritize and to learn what it was like to... I needed to lead. I didn't know what leadership was. I really honestly don't think that I knew what leadership was. But when you're overseeing 140 students and have to manage the relationships of their supervisors at more than a dozen sites and you have to make sure that they get there via transportation and that they are federal work-study approved and that you're managing [inaudible 00:13:08] and they're properly trained, that's a lot.

And I don't think I fully appreciated it at the time, I'm sure that I didn't, that I was acquiring an incredible amount of real-life skills. It was a matter of learning that you were going to share a vision with somebody, you were going to establish a mission, and then you are going to create a plan to execute. And that's something that has been a part of my life ever since. And it's hard for me to imagine what I would be doing or where I would be while I was working at the Mary Ann Shaw Center with Pam Heintz, under her mentorship, if I wasn't given that ability to... The challenge that they gave me to do something and then the opportunity to go do it on my own with their supervision and their support, it's been incredibly impactful on my life.

John Boccacino:

And for our audience, Derek did earn dual degrees in policy studies from the Maxwell School and public relations from the Newhouse School, and really planted those entrepreneurial seeds, the managerial seeds when he was a student at Syracuse. And fast-forwarding to today, you are a successful entrepreneur who co-founded Kalamata's Kitchen, a multimedia children's property that uses the power of food to help children get excited to experience all that their world has to offer them. What was the motivation behind launching this entity?

Derek Wallace:

Well, I'll sort of jump right in by saying that it's no coincidence that the primary way that we interact with audiences today is through books. So where my career started at the Shaw Center in children's literacy, now I'm the co-creator of a children's book series. It's funny to think about how that full circle and everything that happened in between.

But what really motivated me to start Kalamata's Kitchen was I was working in a corporate environment that I now describe as kryptonite to creativity. All the things that I learned when I was at the Shaw Center about challenging status quo and improving circumstances and creating a positive sort of culture, a positive culture, the culture I was a part of in my corporate environment was the opposite of that. And the whole idea of doing well and doing good was clearly not going to continue because I was doing well, but I was not doing good, either personally or for the world around me, and I was motivated to do something about that.

So that put me on a course to sort of correct what was going on in that organization while recognizing that I really needed to leave. And it brought me back to things that I care about most, as I mentioned. So the idea was how could we create something that got kids as excited to learn about the world through food as I was. As an adult, I've been lucky enough to travel, which I wasn't able to do as a child. And that meant that when I'd go to a place, whether it's a town over or on another continent, I would learn about that place through the food in that area, the traditions, the stories, the culture, all of those things.

And it allowed me to develop a greater sense of empathy and awareness of the world around me. And I wanted my son to care about doing those things as much as I did. And the concept that came to mind was if I created a character that was for kids, what Anthony Bourdain was for me as an adult, then we could really help parents raise a generation of more compassionate and empathetic kids. So that's what we did. We started this brand just from an idea and built it to something that's partnered with some of the biggest brands, biggest chefs and media celebrities in the world, so it's been quite a ride.

John Boccacino:

And it's really well illustrated and well conceived. And Kalamata with her, of course, loyal, faithful Companion, the stuffed alligator Al Dente, I love that name for the sidekick. All these characters go around using food as a central focus for these experiences. How have you heard from children, from the parents who have read these books, how these experiences with the series and with the books are really providing value to their families?

Derek Wallace:

Well, when we get to spend time directly with kids and parents, that's our favorite thing to do, whether it's at our live events. In fact, we hosted an event in partnership with the athletic department in Falk College at the JMA Wireless Dome where we had a tasting event that allowed kids to taste the foods that some of their athlete heroes grew up eating. Whether it's book readings that we do in schools, those are our favorite things to do.

And what we constantly hear is that, especially the grownups, the parents or the educators or the caregivers say, "I can't believe how excited you've gotten my child to explore something." To us, that's the most powerful thing in the world. We truly believe that there's no greater compliment that you can pay a person than saying that they're curious, and we want to tap into that curiosity with food.

And what we understand is that many times is adults and grownups, we project our biases upon kids, particularly when it comes to food. "Oh, you won't like that because it's too spicy," or, "You won't like that because it has ingredients that you've never heard of." But we also know that there's nothing in the world more curious than a kid. Kids are curious about everything, they ask a million questions.

So we wanted to tap into that curiosity. And when we spend time interacting with families, with adults and with kids, what we understand is that we have the power to tap into that curiosity in a way that nobody else really has and get them inspired to try something new. What we truly believe is that if a kid

understands that the next thing that they try might be the best thing that they've ever tasted in their lives, that will also remind them that the next person they meet might be their best friend for life, or the next place they go might be the most beautiful place they've ever seen. So the most amazing experiences in life start with something that was once unfamiliar, and we want to use food as a way to reinforce that to kids.

John Boccacino:

It really feels like, Derek, this whole work that you're doing is a full circle tribute to Kenneth Shaw and Mary Ann Shaw and what they implemented upon you when you were an impressionable student here on the hill.

Derek Wallace:

You couldn't be more right. There's no way for me to think about the passion that I have for the work that I do today, the course that led me to it and the values that were important to me, that reminded me that all of those things were really grounded in the work that I started doing. And the belief, really, truly the belief that Kenneth Shaw, Mary Ann Shaw, Pam Heintz, Bill Coplin put in me, they believed in me more than I believed in myself. That's, to me, the definition of a true mentor. And that's what they did is they provided me with the mentorship that would really put me on a pathway for the rest of my life and I couldn't be more grateful.

John Boccacino:

I want to thank you so much, Derek, for taking the time to share these career experiences and these valuable life lessons and just the real lasting impact that the Shaw Center had on you. Keep up the great work, and again, thank you for being so connected to your alma mater.

Derek Wallace:

I appreciate the chance to talk about this, it means a lot to me.

John Boccacino:

Well, as we continue to explore the meaningful impact of the Shaw Center here on Syracuse University's campus, we heard from Derek Wallace on the first part of this episode, well, it is my pleasure to welcome on senior Claire Ceccoli, who is studying public relations in the SI Newhouse School of Public Communications and also psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences. Claire is one of the leadership interns with the Shaw Center, and she is credited with rejuvenating the Syracuse University Volunteer Organization. Now, Claire has chaired the impactful bed-build projects to benefit Sleep in Heavenly Peace, and has also played a pivotal role in promoting the center's initiatives as a public relations intern. Claire, thank you so much for making the time to join us today.

Claire Ceccoli:

Thank you so much. I'm thrilled to be here.

John Boccacino:

We've really gotten a good glimpse from Derek's perspective on why he was motivated to get involved with the Shaw Center, and now it's your turn. Give us what the attraction was for you with this prestigious part of our university's campus.

Claire Ceccoli:

I got involved with the Shaw Center towards the end of my freshman year. And honestly, it wasn't even something I was looking for. I kind of stumbled upon it at an involvement fair and met a couple of the, at the time, leadership interns. After getting connected with the office, I came in and what drew me to the office was the people in this space. It is an incredibly collaborative environment and every single intern and staff member is so passionate about the work that they're doing. It's kind of a contagiousness that you can't help but feel. And my whole life, I've been really interested in mission-driven work and non-profit work, and to have an office at the university that's so committed to their initiatives and getting students out into the community, I don't think I could have found a better or more natural fit, and it's been the best three and a half years since then.

John Boccacino:

When it comes to the college life, there's this interesting balance between development as who you are personally and giving back to your community. And the common theme with the Shaw Center seems to be that engagement, getting people out into the city, into the community to volunteer and to give back. What was your introduction to the Shaw Center as far as a service-based activity?

Claire Ceccoli:

One of my favorite parts about the Shaw Center is just how complex it is. They have so many different programming and initiatives, whether it's students who are going into the schools and they are teaching financial literacy or they're doing nutrition lessons or STEM initiatives.

So I got to do a site visit one day where I was on the PR team, so I got to tag along and take one of the Shaw Center shuttles into the school and go in with the volunteers and kind of see what are these lessons? What are our interns building out in their programming? It's such an incredible experience to do that, to get to go right from campus. It's super easy, super accessible, right? The Shaw Center vans take you there.

And then to witness SU students stepping up and they're leading and commanding the classroom, the teacher steps back completely and they're the ones who are teaching these different lessons and the children that they tutor get so excited. It's like a palpable joy. And like, "The college students are coming in today." And it's just really fun to see those relationships form and the joy and all of it, again, is centered around literacy and then learning these key topics.

So the more I got involved in the Shaw Center, the more different site visits I got to do, the more community partners I would meet with to learn what are their needs and maybe how can the university help, and building these relationships continued to blossom and develop over time and was a key and critical part of my work within the Shaw Center.

John Boccacino:

And how did you go about fostering that relationship with whatever constituent you were working with on a project or a service initiative?

Claire Ceccoli:

One of the main things that the Shaw Center does a really great job of teaching the leadership interns is, and Pam specifically, she talks a lot about reciprocal learning. So we want to help the community in the best way that we can, and we also are learning from them. It's a two-way street when you're building these relationships. So that's kind of the framework when you go into any of these meetings is how can we best help the community partner without overwhelming them? And how can we best help our students feel empowered to get involved in the community and to learn from the community partner?

So I think doing this sort of work with that mindset of it's a reciprocal learning, this is a mutually beneficial relationship, but at the heart of it all being like, "We're there to help the community," it makes

all of this work so rewarding and just natural and kind of easy. When you're building these relationships, it's really, truly a wonderful experience.

John Boccacino:

Speaking of wonderful experiences, I was so impressed that day in February when we had more than 200 community volunteers come together to build these beds for children in need to benefit the local chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace. Give our audience a little background into the thought process that went into this initiative and just how impactful it was, seeing the difference we were making in our community.

Claire Ceccoli:

Sleep in Heavenly Peace is an incredible nonprofit organization, and it's actually run and led by Syracuse staff, alum, faculty. There's all of these connections, and so I was connected with the organization the beginning of my junior year, and I learned that they have a mission that no child in our community sleeps on the floor. And they have delivered, the Syracuse chapter, 6,000 beds within our area. 6,000 children have received a bed since they've started, and there's still a wait list of 400 children.

The work that they're doing is so necessary and needed and impactful. And I think a bed is not something anyone usually thinks about as being a privilege. It's very easy to take that for granted. So once I connected with the organization, learned about their mission and was like, "Okay, how can I get involved? How can I help?" I also learned that Sleep in Heavenly Peace, their biggest dream, they had always wanted to do a build on campus with Syracuse University students because they had worked there, they'd gone to school there. They wanted to bring their organization to campus and to get everyone involved.

And one of the really cool parts about the Shaw Center is that they are so supportive of their students that they will rally behind any idea you have, any project you want to take on, any initiative you want to lead. They're going to be right there. So I heard about this and I was like, "Okay, I think I want to do this," having no idea how ambitious it was when I started doing this. So that was definitely a really fun lesson.

And founding this event and getting approval from campus leaders and getting the word out to volunteers, it takes a village to do this sort of work. And every single intern at the Shaw Center stepped up and every single employee at the Shaw Center supported me. And every single day I'd go into my supervisor at the time, her name's Catherine, I'd go into her office with a long list of to-do things, and I'd just go through it every day just to check in. And she would always kind of laugh just like, "Claire, you don't need me. I'm just here to support you."

But just to have an adult there who was just empowering me like that. And the leader that I am today is largely a result of all of my experiences at the Shaw Center. That when I set out to do this initiative, there was never a moment where someone was like, "Ooh, are you sure? It's going to be a lot of work." It was, "Okay. Okay, Claire, how can we help?"

And I think that kind of support allowed me to go all in on this and that sort of passion and drive really then kind of spread like wildfire throughout campus. And suddenly, we have all these students who want to help volunteer and people who I didn't even know reaching out to me, "How can I get involved? How can I help?"

And I feel so grateful that I was working in a center that was immediately behind me throughout all of it, that there was never any hesitation. They knew exactly what I needed when I didn't know, and what I needed was someone to believe in me and encourage me to continue doing that sort of work. And I can take that with me for the rest of my life now, thank you to the Shaw Center. And now I can go out into the world in whatever community I end up in and hopefully continue driving initiatives like this.

John Boccacino:



How does that make you feel when you're seeing and knowing that the fruits of your labor is going to this vulnerable segment of the population that needs these resources?

Claire Ceccoli:

This sort of work is incredibly rewarding and a reminder of the privilege that I have. I would also say something that I've learned from the Shaw Center is when you're doing this sort of work at all, going into it with some sort of long-term vision as well.

So planning this event, this bed-building where we had all these students show up and they built all these beds and it's such an emotional day and so rewarding to see everything come together, but it doesn't stop there. My goal for that event was not for it to be a one-day thing where students show up, they have a good time, they get to use some tools, whatever, they go home, they don't think about it. My goal and the way I kind of framed everything and talked about with all my teammates before the initiative was basically, how can we make this something that's a launching point for students?

So students show up to the event and hopefully, my goal is that it plants a seed in them of now they've volunteered and hopefully they've enjoyed that and now they think, "I want to do this again. This feels really good and wow, this mission is really needed. I need to continue doing that."

So at the event, we had a table with information, "Here's other things you can get involved with and volunteer at. Here are signups for Saturday deliveries. Do you want to go and then deliver the beds to the children who are going to receive them?" Keeping in mind this entire time that, again, the volunteering as a one-time thing, it can be impactful, but it's so much more impactful when it is a longer term commitment to the communities that we're working in.

And I'm not sure I would've been thinking like that had I not been at the Shaw Center. I think they do such a good job of teaching us what true service can look like and then trying to model that for other students. And hopefully that kind of continues as a legacy.

John Boccacino:

When Mary Ann Shaw and then-Chancellor Kenneth Shaw formed this center back in 1994, it was part of a promise that student learning would be the highest priority on campus, promoting volunteer service as a fundamental part of the student experience. Through your experiences with the Shaw Center, how has that helped you develop as a student and as a leader?

Claire Ceccoli:

That foundation piece of the Shaw Center has truthfully transformed, I think, my leadership experience and my belief in myself. So when you walk into the Shaw Center, it is students running the show. We have amazing staff there that's supporting us, but we are the ones creating the work, we are the ones doing it.

And at first, that was very intimidating and scary, and I was kind of wanting, like, "Wait, can you give me a detailed explanation? How am I supposed to do this?" But they kind of let you do it and learn while you're doing it. And that sort of environment just promotes an exceptional growth because you realize what you're capable of and that you maybe wouldn't have realized if you didn't have staff saying, "No, go ahead. You can do this. You can try it, you can figure it out. You can fail and then get back up."

But you're the one who is doing it and it's just magic because that's the framework of the entire organization, but also they just really care about us as students. And you can feel that, you can feel that care when you're in the office. And I don't know about you, but I work so much better for leaders when I feel like they really care about me and they believe in me. And it brings out this desire, I want to show them what I am capable of because they clearly think there's something there in me. So doing that since my freshman year and being in that caring and supportive environment has allowed me to hone on my

skills of communication and leadership and collaboration and project management and all of these things that maybe wouldn't have been possible if I didn't have an environment that was so open and promoting that type of growth.

John Boccacino:

How have your experiences volunteering influenced the type of work and the field that you want to get into once you graduate?

Claire Ceccoli:

Working at the Shaw Center and getting to interact with so many different community partners, nonprofit organizations, and to kind of get a real look at what this work involves, I can say, without a doubt, this is the type of work I want to do for the rest of my life. This passion that I see in these community organizations and the change that I see is possible when people take their skills and really step up is something that I want to model for the rest of my life.

Whether that means I'm working directly within a nonprofit organization or whether it's more of the corporate social responsibility side where I'm at a corporation, but maybe using corporate resources to empower nonprofits, I feel like I've learned a really good background of what it takes to do this sort of work from my own experiences, from talking with Pam and then learning about her experiences, and just knowing the kind of relentlessness it takes to be in a social impact field. I'm really excited to see what that looks like specifically for me, but I know that I am prepared because of my time at the Shaw Center.

John Boccacino:

If you had to give advice to, let's say there's a student listening to the episode and they're wondering why they should get involved with the Shaw Center, what would be your pitch?

Claire Ceccoli:

Why am I so passionate about it and what is a student going to get out of these experiences should they choose to get involved? I think it's really easy sometimes to just be in your little bubble at school, and then just to stay comfortable on campus. And our campus is amazing and that's great, but we have such a beautiful community surrounding us, and the Shaw Center makes it so easy to get there, to get involved. They coordinate the transportation for you, they set up the volunteering. They kind of take away maybe some of the headaches that you would have, and they just let the focus and the sole purpose of it all be the mission behind what you're doing and the volunteer experience you're about to have.

And you learn so much about yourself when you step outside of your comfort zone, when you step into the community, when you are standing there ready to give back. And that type of personal growth and then that reward is something that I couldn't recommend enough to Syracuse students, and it does prepare us then to continue to be leaders outside of our time at the university.

John Boccacino:

It's true that you carry around a physical reminder from one of the very first beds that you helped deliver, correct?

Claire Ceccoli:

Yes, that is true. So on one of my first bed deliveries, when we were in the car, there was a little piece of wood that had chipped off. And I put it in my pocket, didn't really think about it, went in, built the bed with the child who was going to receive it. And they were jumping up and down and so excited and, "Oh my gosh, the comforter has sports on it. I love sports and this is perfect." And kind of being like, "Oh my

gosh, what a gift this is." And it's a tangible impact that I'm able to see right here, right in my community. These beds are getting delivered blocks from campus. The work is happening right here.

So ever since then, kept that wood chip in my pocket and I keep it in my pocket every day and I'll reach in my pocket and feel it, and it's just a reminder of, one, the privilege I have of like, okay, I need to not be taking for granted the gifts that are in my life, but two, that this work is not done. This work needs to continue. We need to have people who will advocate for these children, leaders who will step up to continue this work, whether that's specifically with Sleep in Heavenly Peace, whether that's other nonprofit organizations. But just knowing that the job is not done and we are capable of being change makers.

It sounds intimidating when it's like, oh, I really want to make change in the world. It's like, okay, how are you going to do that? But it really starts, I think, in your community. I can make a difference in my community. I can maybe make a difference for one child, and that's enough. That's rewarding in itself, and I want to continue pursuing that and remembering why I am doing it and who it's helping. So that woodchip, it's just such a great way to always go back to remember, why am I doing this? Why does this matter? And then thinking about the kids has made planning the bed-building initiative so worth it because how could you not want to do this sort of work when you think about it like that?

John Boccacino:

Well, the profound impact of the Shaw Center will be on display April 21st as we celebrate 30 years of the Shaw Center. And of course, I want to thank our guest, Claire Ceccoli, for coming on. Best of luck with all your initiatives and efforts moving forward.

Claire Ceccoli:

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.