AmeriCorps* Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA, is a full-time national service program for individuals interested in developing lasting solutions to the problems of poverty in America. VISTA and Michigan Campus Compact have approved a grant between Kirtland Community College and River House Shelter for the 2010 to 2011 school year. This grant will be used as funding for our new VISTA representative, Sophie Tullier, to develop and implement collaborative projects between Kirtland and River House, Inc. for domestic violence survivors as well as other projects between Kirtland Community College and the Great Start Collaborative. River House, Inc. and Kirtland have worked together to establish programs that mutually benefit both Kirtland students and River House residents. A goal this past year was urging domestic violence survivors to adopt healthy eating habits on a limited budget whether eating at home or in a restaurant. This helped raise more awareness for the Empty Bowls project for domestic violence, as Kirtland students made pottery bowls which were then sold to aid those in need of money for food, so that River House, Inc. could buy healthier choices. Proposed programs in the continuing collaboration between Kirtland and River House are aimed at properly training Kirtland Criminal Justice students to work with victims of domestic violence. In addition to her work on domestic violence, VISTA Sophie Tullier has incorporated the Great Start Collaborative which advocates for early childhood education development and raises awareness for parents about early childhood resources in our area.

Sophie has also brought to campus the idea of an Alternative Spring Break (ASB) for Kirtland students. This program is designed for the students that want to make a difference with their break and be free from Florida and other cliché spring break routines. This spring break took our travelers to Chicago, Illinois to do service around the theme of hunger, food justice and food security in a substance free environment. The first day they worked with A Just Harvest, a soup kitchen setup like a regular restaurant. The volunteers from Kirtland helped make the dinner, consisting of a healthy balanced meal, served the food and helped clean up. This integrated our volunteers into the Chicago way of life as they got to know some of the people. Our volunteers not only felt great about being able to help but also were surprised at the number of children and families who were there because they could not afford their own meals. Over the next couple of days the volunteers worked with the Greater Chicago Food Depository which is the main food pantry for all of Chicago. They started out by separating bulk cereal with the use of shovels and plastic bags to be able to redistribute the food in individual portions to smaller kitchens around the city. They also worked with high school volunteers which led to great experiences for both, as they got to interact and share experiences between Chicago and Michigan. Then, on the last day, the volunteers got to go experience the big city of Chicago and take in all the sites. Near the trips end the students were able to reflect at night and they all realized how big of a difference that they made. This opened their eyes to all of the people who truly need help and how they are not so very different from people that live here.
The 2010 trip to Guatemala took seventeen participants through Guatemala City, Jungles of Santa Anita and the cobblestone sidewalks of Antigua. Not only did they have fun taking in the sights but worked for nonprofit organizations and participated in service learning projects as well. A business student at KCC, Kari Bartlett, said “This whole trip was a ‘wow’ moment.” KCC recent graduate, Bill Berlin, commented “It feels weird to be back. I miss the people, the hope, the view, the connection.” These participants had an eye-opening experience in Guatemala and all would go back in a heartbeat to enjoy it again.

The International Service Learning trip to Nicaragua will be May 1st through the 8th, 2011. This trip will let students, as well as staff, experience the thrill and wonder of Latin America. They will be exploring not only the country of Nicaragua but will get in-depth looks at various social issues, such as women’s rights, education, health, indigenous rights, agriculture and sustainable development. They will also be visiting a LIVE volcano and will experience living with host families to be integrated into everyday life.

This past November 10th through 12th, Nicholas Holton and VISTA member Sophie Tullier organized and facilitated the National Rural Service Learning Summit hosted by the Rural Alliance for Service Learning (RASL) at the Sienna Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The 2010 RASL was sponsored by a grant from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. This RASL meeting was to create a white paper based on individual member case studies that will be turned into an anthology sometime this year.

The Kirtland Community College Service Learning department completed the Self Assessment study for the 2010 school year. The Self Assessment is used as a way to reflect on the success of Service Learning in the past, and ways to improve for the future. The results obtained looked promising and will be published by semester’s end.

Also a HUGE THANKS goes out to the KCC Foundation and the Student Senate for their generous donations for the Guatemala, Nicaragua and Alternative Spring Break Service Learning trips!

To comment/learn more about Service Learning visit KCC’s webpage under the Service Learning link and check out the KCC blog at http://blogs.kirtland.edu/servicelearning/