



SOS members help beautify the garden areas at Seven Lakes High School



Friends pause to smile and model special "Turkey Dash" visors

# Spartans Out Serving

Seven Lakes' student-led service organization makes a big difference in the community

Written by Susanna Donald

Photography courtesy of Seven Lakes High School

**M**ary Ann is a resident at one of Katy's assisted living centers for people with Alzheimer's. Her speech is garbled and her memory is gone, so most people don't understand her when she speaks - but Pranay Tamminayana isn't most people. Neither are the rest of the nearly 1,600 members of Spartans Out Serving (SOS), a non-profit organization at Seven Lakes High School dedicated to creating lifelong volunteers out of students.

"I know Mary Ann understands what everybody else is saying," says Tamminayana. "Most of the time when I talk to her I can understand bits and pieces. I always look forward to meeting her when I go there." Through SOS, students like Tamminayana are discovering the true benefit of volunteering in the community: The more you serve others, the more you receive in return. "When I volunteer I always learn something about myself," he says.



Students sport their distinctive SOS T-shirts when volunteering around Katy



SOS top members Abby Graeflin, Colby Brown, Angela Camille, Melissa Keckley, Jack Weber, Caitlyn Mortus, Kent Cho, and Mark Melton



### Starting out Serving

In 2005, SOS started with a group of parents who thought students volunteering as freshmen would be more prepared to complete the required number of senior-year service hours needed to receive the highly prized community service graduation cord. Jan Bergamo, one of the founding parents, remembers, "It was perfect timing. The school was brand-new and still small, and the students were looking for places to plug in." Bergamo, along with other SLHS parents Debbie Muir and Jamie Wagner, seized the opportunity. "We saw the success of the CATS (Cougars Achieving Through Service) program at Cinco Ranch High School and knew we needed to start something like it at Seven Lakes," says Bergamo. "We knew this was the chance for Seven Lakes to begin a reputation of being a school that cared for the community."

Each year, students can be awarded for recording a certain number of volunteer hours, but SOS wanted to be more than a group that simply checked volunteering off of a list. "We wanted the kids to learn how to have a heart for others, not just have something to put on a resume," says Muir. Inspired by other service organizations and by the movie *Pay It Forward*, parents and volunteers planned group projects

like food drives and toy drives to help students who didn't know how to get started on their own. Pretty soon, kids were leading their own projects. "It became easy for them to find their own passion for serving," remembers Bergamo. Two years after it began, SOS was completely student-led.

### Volunteering in the Digital Age

In recent years, the program has evolved to make an even bigger impact on the Katy community, most notably by incorporating x2VOL from IntelliVOL, an internet-based community service management system that provides customized tracking and reporting for volunteer activity. Instead of reams of paper detailing each student's community service, everything from finding projects to recording hours is now completed online. "Before x2VOL, students were all handing in their hours at one time," says Tracey Grimme, former SOS faculty sponsor. "It really put a time restraint on the sponsors."

Students can find volunteer opportunities on their own, through local places of worship, or around the school, but IntelliVOL and the SOS Facebook page help cast the net wider and farther. "Tons of places need volunteers," notes



Melissa Keckley founded the Milk 4 Many program, which collects unused items and delivers them to Katy Christian Ministries



Volunteering is easy when you're working alongside friends

David Burton, second-year SOS member. Things like x2VOL and Facebook connect students to the opportunities they may not know about otherwise.

## Neighbors in Need

Many of the students who participate in SOS start out having no idea how much need there is in the community around them. Melissa Keckley, former SOS president, started the Milk 4 Many Program at Seven Lakes, collecting unused milk, juice, and chips at lunch and delivering them to Katy Christian Ministries' Food Bank each day. "One of the Milk 4 Many volunteers emailed me after driving the coolers to the food bank," Keckley says. "She told me it changed her life to see this 'other side' of Katy."

Last year, SOS students logged over 25,000 volunteer hours. Some students earn hours on church-led mission trips. Others enjoy volunteering at local retirement homes, places of worship, camps for children with special needs, Katy area schools, Katy Christian Ministries, the YMCA, neighborhood homeowner associations, and community organizations. It's really up to the student to find the projects they are interested in - the ones that make them want to keep coming back for more.

## Beyond the White Cord

Students who achieve the 60-hour milestone their senior year are awarded a white community service cord to wear at graduation. They also have a wealth of experience to display on their resumes, and some students are even selected for scholarships because of their service.

What, then, remains after the diplomas are awarded, the white cords stored away in keepsake boxes, and the kids leave SOS (and Seven Lakes) for the wider world of college? "They keep on serving," says Muir. "I've noticed it in my own children and in their friends. They get involved with sororities and fraternities with the goal of contributing to the philanthropies."

"It's not necessarily natural for teenagers to think outside of themselves," says Bergamo. "It's the 'all about me' syndrome. SOS teaches them how to think of others, and I think starting at such a young age is key to helping them continue beyond high school." Keckley agrees. "SOS is unique because its only motivation is service. It's just about helping people. I got my passion for serving completely from SOS, and I know it will extend into my college life and beyond." **KM**

*SUSANNA DONALD enjoys being part of Katy Magazine's editorial team. She lives in Fulshear with her husband, 2-year-old son, and ornery cat.*

## Inspired to Serve?

Have the students of SOS inspired you to serve? There are plenty of great places in Katy to volunteer. Here are a few to get you started:

**Brookwood**  
[brookwoodcommunity.org](http://brookwoodcommunity.org)

**Christ Clinic**  
[christclinnkaty.org](http://christclinnkaty.org)

**Citizens for Animal Protection**  
[cap4pets.org](http://cap4pets.org)

**Katy Art Reach**  
[katyartreach.org](http://katyartreach.org)

**Katy Christian Ministries**  
[ktcm.org](http://ktcm.org)

**Katy ISD**  
[katyisd.org](http://katyisd.org)

**Katy YMCA**  
[ymcahouston.org/katy](http://ymcahouston.org/katy)

**Krause Center**  
[krausechildrenscenter.org](http://krausechildrenscenter.org)

**Pregnancy Help Center**  
[phckaty.org](http://phckaty.org)

**Sunrise Senior Living Center of Cinco Ranch**  
[sunriseseniorliving.com](http://sunriseseniorliving.com)

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