Dear Commonwealth Corps Members, Partners, Alumni, and Friends,

As the 2018-2019 program term comes to a close, we are excited to celebrate the incredible accomplishments of our Commonwealth Corps members and host site partners. This year’s members have helped expand and enhance their host organizations’ programming both through immediate client and community impact, and towards longer-term capacity building projects. Members have done this by creating a bilingual literacy program for elementary students, developing enrichment programming for homeless adults, piloting out-of-school-time health education programming for teens, and more. Thank you and congratulations to all of our 2018-2019 members and partners!

We are excited to see what these members do next, ranging from continuing their education and working in higher ed, to consulting and transitioning to staff roles at their host sites. We’re also looking forward to the next program year, which will begin in August. You can help strengthen our future by spreading the word about the Commonwealth Corps service internship positions that are available for the 2019-2020 service term (more details here).

Thank You & Congrats!

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Madison Park Development Corporation

The mission of Madison Park Development Corporation (MPDC) is to foster a vibrant, healthy Roxbury neighborhood that supports the well-being and advancement of the community. MPDC is a leading developer of affordable housing among the nonprofit sector and one of the largest community development corporations in Massachusetts.

Our Commonwealth Corps member, Erica Cannon, has been coordinating our Peer Health Leader program, which aims at cultivating resident leaders with health and wellness programming at our MPDC properties. The program is made up of a group of residents who all work together to promote health in the Roxbury community. They do this through outreach, planning promotional health events, sharing information about health topics, educating community members about healthy living, and helping residents get engaged in health activities.

Erica has increased awareness to the Peer Health Leader program among residents by developing recruitment messaging and conducting volunteer outreach. She has also supported the residents in the program by organizing weekly meetings and conducting trainings.

Having a Commonwealth Corps member this past year has allowed us to extend our network of resident leaders and find ways to better cultivate relationships within our larger community. The opportunity to be a host site has also helped us expand our capacity to establish and maintain consistent efforts with our various resident engagement initiatives.

As a Roxbury native, Erica has had a positive impact on MPDC and the Peer Health Leader program by serving her community and showing up as a leader each day. She’s been able to provide positive and constructive feedback to improve how we work both internally and externally, helping us to better cultivate relationships with our residents to ensure their voices and concerns are heard.

We hope to continue the projects that Erica has spearheaded, and we look forward to continuing to have her involved as an active member of our community.

“Erica is a fresh bundle of energy and we love working with her!”

- Peer Health Leader

Madison Park Development Corporation member Erica Cannon with residents

- Beyazmin Jimenez, Resident and Civic Engagement Manager, Madison Park Development Corporation
MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

ERICA CANNON

After serving as an AmeriCorps member, I was looking for another opportunity to serve where I could advance and sharpen my skills in community development. The Commonwealth Corps service position at MPDC provided me with the opportunity to strengthen my professional skills and build more relationships in my neighborhood. Growing up in low income subsidy housing in Roxbury, I wanted to work with residents to build programming and sustain a cohesive, vibrant Roxbury. MPDC’s dedication to its residents and saying yes to community development and empowerment is the reason I decided to serve and make a difference in my community.

I have been working to increase awareness to the Peer Health Leader program by being present at MPDC events, updating promotional materials, and adding a member benefit to increase volunteer participation. I also built relationships with the Peer Health Leaders, planned and organized bi-weekly meetings, and reported their feedback and suggestions to staff.

This service year has been an amazing opportunity for me to enhance my professional development skills, both at MSA trainings and through support from MPDC to connect me to trainings that will help me advance my career. I even had the opportunity to attend the Community Leadership Institute in Houston, Texas, which was a very informative conference and great opportunity to network and meet people from different communities that stand together and stand strong. The best part of the CLI was attending the Dorothy Richardson Awards for Resident Leadership Dinner. The honorees’ stories were inspiring and uplifting. I enjoyed the conference a lot and look forward to bringing everything I learned back to the community I serve.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I served in the community I grew up in to help foster a vibrant and healthy Roxbury, by working with residents on developing programs and trainings.

AGE: 37
HOMETOWN: ROXBURY
CURRENT HOME: ROXBURY

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Back in 2017, I stumbled across the Commonwealth Corps position online while searching for nonprofit jobs, and I was fascinated by the idea of dedicating a year to serve my local community. Until that point, I had only heard of service programs that sent volunteers to serve far from home, like the Peace Corps. I took the plunge and became a Commonwealth Corps Education Ambassador at Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay, a mentoring organization based in Boston. My service term not only got my feet wet in the nonprofit sector, but also ignited a passion in me for volunteerism and civic engagement.

My Commonwealth Corps role at BBBSMB placed me on the Mentor 2.0 program team, which combined a one-on-one mentoring for high school students with a college readiness curriculum. Over the course of the school year, I helped enroll a cohort of ninth-grade students to help match them with mentors, facilitated monthly after-school events where matches spent time together in person, and supported the students in class as they wrote to their mentors online and learned about college readiness topics, such as social capital and growth mindset. The moments that stand out the most to me are sitting down with students for their enrollment interviews and watching the kids who are usually the most reserved and disengaged begin to open up and share about themselves and their ambitions for the future.

After my Commonwealth Corps term ended, I stayed on at my host site to work in my current role of Program and Database Assistant, which is an administrative role within the Program Services department. I enjoy being able to collaborate with different teams across the organization and seeing the systems and processes behind the scenes that support the work we do. I greatly appreciate the professional development that I received through the Commonwealth Corps, which helped me hone in on my interests and passions and become more discerning in the next step in my career.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I discovered a meaningful entry point into the social impact sector and developed an incredible network of like-minded peers.

EMILY MORRISON

SERVICE TERM: 2017-2018
SERVICE LOCATION: BOSTON
CURRENT HOME: BOSTON
Reader to Reader

Reader to Reader is dedicated to expanding literacy and learning opportunities for chronically underserved and vulnerable communities in Massachusetts. Our Commonwealth Corps members, Isabelle Kim and Rumi Hamden, play a key role in coordinating our Read, Think, Share mentoring program, the largest academic mentoring program in Western Massachusetts. Together they oversee over 200 college student reading mentors that are helping middle and high school students build the reading and writing skills that will take them on to college.

Each of our CC members has brought skills that have greatly benefited our programs. Isabelle’s organizational and project management skills have helped us better manage our hundreds of college student reading mentors. And, Rumi, in addition to her outstanding work on Read, Think, Share, has been teaching our Blueprint for Success college readiness program. This program, which works with juniors attending Greenfield High School, focuses on all aspects of the college selection and application process, including SAT test preparation, financial aid and scholarship, and finding a college that is the perfect fit.

The impact of our CC members was felt from the very beginning. At our initial Breads and Spreads (our biweekly collection of timesheets where we incentivize mentors to come to the office for food), Rumi began to introduce herself to the students involved in the program. Watching her build connections with mentors she later supported throughout the academic year has been very exciting, and touching to see that she remembers their names and asks about their well-being. She’s expressed that it has been meaningful to her to know those whom she directly works with.

And as part of her service year, Isabelle reached out to Baystate Children’s Hospital in Springfield about their pediatric library, connecting her interest in medicine and background as a premed student and the mission of the organization. She brought approximately 300 books to contribute to their library and hopes to continue this partnership in years going forward. The experience tuned her in to the overlap between medicine, nonprofit work and service, and she’s begun to look at business school as an option for her future plans.

“Both Isabelle and Rumi combine great organizational skills with their ability to relate well with teachers, students, and our college student reading mentors. Their positive attitudes helped motivate and inspire others. We are so delighted to have such excellent Commonwealth Corps members. Through their energy, intelligence and hard work, they have increased our on-site and off-site support for our mentors, and this will last long after they are gone.”

- David Mazor, Executive Director
Reader To Reader, Inc.

Reader to Reader members Rumi Handen and Isabelle Kim

SPOTLIGHT
RUMI HAN DEN

I chose to serve because I wanted to utilize my liberal arts education through experiential learning in host site and community environments. I was fresh out of college and ready to make an impact on the place that had supported me in my own development as a student; serving at Reader to Reader would have allowed me to contribute to the educational experience of those in the Pioneer Valley.

Commonwealth Corps’ commitment to supporting service members in their own professional development was another draw to the program.

Over the last ten and a half months, I have been able to support Read. Think. Share, an online mentoring program, as well as design and lead Blueprint for Success, a weekly college preparation course for high school students in Greenfield. It has been gratifying to review post-program surveys from students who confirm that reading with college mentors has encouraged them to see reading as something fun, from mentors who genuinely loved supporting and reading with younger students, and from teachers who felt our format added to their curriculum.

Serving at Reader to Reader in general has given me the freedom to reflect on my academic, personal and career growth. This service opportunity reminds me of my love for learning, developing curriculum and academia in general. Literature will always be present in my life. Working with high school students has offered me an opportunity to maintain my teaching skills, which I will continue using in graduate school while teaching language courses to undergraduates.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I am prepared to begin a masters at Boston College in Italian Studies.

This year has been incredibly informative for me. I’ve learned a great deal about communication, witnessed my own responses to conflict, widened my scope of professional interests, and found myself belonging more to my community here in the Pioneer Valley. And, while maybe not the most exciting example, the relationship I developed over the course of the year with a student in our Read, Think, Share program has impacted me the most. This student, a brilliant, thoughtful, and confident young lady in middle school, humbled me with her insights, provoked my curiosity with her contentious but remarkable questions, and offered me the opportunity to read books I perhaps wouldn’t have picked up on my own.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, my educational and career goals have switched from pre-med to pre-business.

ISABELLE KIM

Through the year, I witnessed her grow as a reader (as I had initially hoped and expected to) but also as a dancer and writer (to my surprise). She was and remains the reason I believe in this organization, and that she tells me I served her as a mentor, second-reader, and general enthusiastic friend as thoroughly as she grew me is what makes me want to continue both with Reader to Reader and perhaps later with non-profit work.

Truthfully, I didn’t choose to serve with students like her in mind from the get go. I was very much indebted to the Pioneer Valley, having attended college here, and I did want to contribute back to it. But the interest was a bit distant from the hopes of Reader to Reader. I was initially interested in using my afternoons and weekends to serve my college community, and I viewed the Commonwealth Corps as an avenue to stay. But to my surprise, I’m again so humbled by how this experience, through students like the one I mentioned, was so much more than I had bargained for.
WriteBoston

WriteBoston offers training and coaching for teachers, along with writing opportunities for students, built on the premise that powerful thinking and writing are inseparable. For the past three years, service members have been instrumental in growing the capacity and vision for our Teens in Print (TiP) youth journalism program. To build on that momentum, we partnered with MSA last year to reach even more under-resourced Boston youth and deepen our post-secondary supports through the Commonwealth Corps.

When Sarah Robbins joined our team as a Commonwealth Cops College and Career Readiness Coordinator, she was tasked with developing Next Chapter, a program that would guide high-schoolers through the college application process. We estimated that Sarah would support around 100 Boston students through this initiative, but Sarah met and exceeded our target goals by supporting nearly 150. She not only built the foundation for Next Chapter, but piloted each of its initiatives—all while assisting with the daily work of our journalism program. Sarah has given one-on-one guidance to about 80 students and provided 13 workshops on a variety of post-secondary topics to local schools and community organizations.

Building WriteBoston’s capacity to offer post-secondary support is critical, and frankly long overdue. The students in our programs have always brought their college essay prompts to TiP or the WriteBoston Writing Center for help. Next Chapter provides a structure that allows us to attentively support our students’ perusal of higher education, while acting as a recruitment tool for WriteBoston’s other initiatives.

High school senior Masha’s journey this year embodies the symbiotic connection between Next Chapter and Teens in Print. Masha has been a staff writer for TiP for two years. With college on the horizon, she sought our support. With Sarah’s expertise and encouragement (including accompanying Masha on a college tour), Masha was accepted into UMass Amherst and plans to attend next fall. Dre, a student outside our regular programming who also sought college support, was conversely brought into the TiP program this year, and has since been published in the newspaper.

Alongside her post-secondary initiatives, Sarah has added much-needed capacity to our small but mighty youth services team. Sarah stepped in to lead an eight-week journalism workshop to students at a partner organization and has spent one day a week as a writing center tutor at Boston International High School.

Sarah has been an invaluable addition to our team, and after her service year ends, she will transition to a staff role to continue providing college support and ensure a smooth transition of Next Chapter into our day-to-day operations. We are grateful for Sarah’s perspective, the mentorship she offers our students, and—most importantly—her unbridled support for WriteBoston’s core belief: that writing plays a vital role in student success.

- Liberty Britz, Communications & Development Coordinator, WriteBoston

WriteBoston Commonwealth Corps member Sarah Robbins with a student
SARAH ROBBINS

During my time with City Year, I attended a professional development session with Jessie Gerson about how to get students excited about reading, where she mentioned they were recruiting Commonwealth Corps service members. My passion for service, literacy, and Jessie Gerson’s facilitating skills initially drew me to the Commonwealth Corps.

During this Commonwealth Corps service year, I’ve created free, informational college readiness workshops and delivered them at BPS schools and organizations to increase access to important college readiness tools. I’ve also served individually with high school seniors, to assist with their college essays and ensure they meet critical application deadlines.

One of the most compelling moments during my service occurred at the beginning of the year, the first time I went to a BPS school to assist students with their essays. I happened to be wearing my college sweatshirt, and a student came in and said, “Do you go there? My dream is to go to a woman’s college! I’m all about female empowerment.” Immediately we connected, and I was able to learn more about her. Her high school was underfunded, over-crowded, and in danger of being shut down. Teachers didn’t have the time to take every senior step-by-step through the college process, and the students who took their own lead sometimes did so without any prior knowledge of the system. This particular student was highly motivated--she had already researched the common app and the schools she wanted to apply to, but still needed help with critical essay writing. In that moment, the reality of college readiness became clear: that much of college admissions, to this day, is determined by having the best resources and attending the best high schools. This impressed upon me the importance of free access to college readiness information and critical literacy skills.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I now see literacy as a powerful tool for change in a student’s life.

Members in Action

Top left: Commonwealth Corps members and staff volunteer at More Than Words in Waltham.

Top right: Peer Health Exchange CC members Zarie Locke and India Wood table a health fair in Malden.

Bottom: Westport River Watershed Alliance CC member Bailey Sweet goes ponding.
Thank You to All of Our 2018-2019 Host Site Partners!

STAY CONNECTED