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## COMMUNITY VOICES: Education transforms lives beyond the classroom

By Michele Bresso  
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Michele Bresso

"I'll volunteer to work anywhere but the Bakersfield Homeless Center," one of my students told her project team. The students were working toward a community service project in a small group communication course at Bakersfield College.

As their professor, I assigned students to choose a nonprofit agency, work five hours together there and give a presentation about why the class should support that agency. Despite this team member's resistance to the Homeless Center, the team volunteered there because their personal schedules were full, and the Bakersfield Homeless Center stayed open enough hours in a day and days in a week to ensure the team could spend the required time to complete the assignment.

On the night of the team's speech to the class, we learned the reason for the student's initial refusal to serve at this important and well respected community resource. That reason left us stunned. The student, formerly homeless, had vowed never to return to the center once she turned her life around. Homeless due to extenuating life circumstances, this student survived on

the housing and food provisions of the Bakersfield Homeless Center until she could get back on her feet. Now, she was a successful college student, living independently and well on the way to a happy life. What a success story!

Homelessness lurks in Bakersfield and Kern County like a specter, haunting our government, our institutions and each resident like myself. In 2018, Kern County homelessness saw a 9 percent annual increase from 810 to 855 people and a 38 percent jump in the number of unsheltered people from 269 to 370, according to Home at Last! Kern County's Plan to End Homelessness by 2018. This joint report by United Way of Kern County and the Kern County Homeless Collaborative characterized ending homelessness "the morally correct thing to do." The homeless condition among our peers forces us to look inward to ask what we can do to help.

Bakersfield answers that question in a big way. I'm proud to be part of an organization that reaches out to help students at every level. For example, Bakersfield College feeds any student in need through our Renegade Pantry. Students can use up to 12 points given to them every week to buy food items by simply presenting their student ID.

BC promotes the myriad community resources for food, shelter, legal help, support for veterans and for undocumented students on a college webpage to ensure students know where to get help on campus and throughout the community.

In collaboration with The Mission at Kern County and Adventist Health, Bakersfield College will launch the first pilot cohort of the HireUp Project. This six month program is designed for 24 student participants who will complete a series of steps including orientation, instruction, internship and training leading to the transition to permanent employment. The goal is to take individuals in our community from "homeless to a job" in six months.

To bring the story full circle, that student of mine who didn't want to go back to the Bakersfield Homeless Center did more than complete her five volunteer hours. She met a young woman living at center who was much like herself years before. My student committed to a weekly volunteer schedule at the center so that she could mentor this young woman and model a way to achieve independence.

This is one of the many examples of how education transforms lives.

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