

SERVICE IS THE POINT OF THE FOUNDERS CLUB WHICH EMBODIES OUR MISSION.

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MARSHALL WILLIAMS

SISTER PAT SHAFFER advises the Founders Club, which is devoted to keeping the spirit of the university's founders alive.

[giving back]

SACRED HEART STILL BEATS

Founders Club provides service opportunities and strong sense of community

by Barbara Davenport

When Rebekah Weiss '06 arrived at USD as a freshman from St. Louis, she didn't know anyone. She wanted to connect with people on campus, and she also wanted to get to know San Diego. She ended up in Mecca.

Looking for service opportunities, she joined the Founders Club. Established in 1979, the Founders Club fosters the spirit of community and service embodied by the university's founders, Mother Rosalie Hill and Bishop Charles Buddy. The club provides opportunities for service and outreach

in San Diego as well as Baja California. Oh yes, and the club also goes to Mecca.

Mecca, Calif., in the Imperial Valley, population 5,200, lies 85 miles and a world away from Alcalá Park. Ninety-eight percent of its residents are Hispanic, many of them recent immigrants. They work as farm laborers in the local fields, or travel to Palm Springs to work in hotels and restaurants. For Mecca's youth, college was a remote ideal, an experience that had not touched their families.

The Founders Club changed that. Since 1992, students from

the club travel to Mecca in the fall for a day-long visit with high school students. They talk about their own experiences in high school and at USD, and encourage their young hosts to talk about their aspirations. Their presence is a meaningful event for the students; Founders Club members are living proof that kids not so different from them can go to college.

The club lets the visit sink in for a few months, and then in the spring, they invite the Youth Club to the campus for a weekend. For last spring's visit, Sister Pat Shaffer, the club's advisor, arranged for

members of the women's varsity basketball team to give a tour of the Jenny Craig Pavilion. Biology majors showed them the labs at the Donald P. Shiley Science Center for Science and Technology. Admissions counselors briefed them on college admissions: the courses they'd need, SAT scores, GPAs, essays and other essentials.

"You could see them growing through the weekend," Weiss remembers. "At the beginning they were so shy, then they started talking about their hopes and their dreams." The club's aim with the Mecca youth is not to recruit for USD, but simply to enlarge the students' knowledge of what's possible. Since the club started its visits, more than half of the

Youth Club's members have gone to college and six of them have graduated from USD.

Founders Club membership keeps on giving after graduation. Graduates are invited to join the Alumni Association of the Sacred Heart. In 2007 alone, six graduates became AASH members, and 44 have joined in total.

On campus, Shaffer tells prospective members that the Founders Club is a rich source of community while they're students and for the rest of their lives. Rebekah Weiss agrees with her former mentor. The club helped her build her own community at USD, and to give back in ways that enlarged her own understanding. Her experience confirms that the Sacred Heart still beats. 