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OU students named Mr. and Ms. AmeriCorps

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

For Oakland University juniors Lenny Compton and Crystal Wilkerson, volunteerism and service are not obligations, but simply a way of life.

Both students are members of AmeriCorps Oakland, and have devoted 3,600 hours of their time to an extraordinary amount of service projects and leadership roles. In recognition of their contributions, Compton and Wilkerson's AmeriCorps peers recently named them Mr. and Ms. AmeriCorps for the second consecutive year.

"Mr. and Ms. AmeriCorps are our top program awards," said Carol Anne Ketelsen, program director for AmeriCorps Oakland. "Both Lenny and Crystal are model members. They have demonstrated strong leadership, responsibility and service to the community, university and our team. They're dependable, reliable, outgoing, demonstrate strong citizenship, and are always willing to go the extra mile for the children and others we serve."

Wilkerson, an education major from Ortonville, said her parents encouraged her to begin helping others less fortunate than herself while she was a middle school student.

"I think a lot of my empathy comes from the influence of my parents," Wilkerson said. "I'm compassionate for people who don't have as good a life as I do. So instead of sitting back and watching, I decided I would try to do something about it by helping others."

Wilkerson recently participated in a project called "Empty Bowls, Full Hearts," in which AmeriCorps Oakland organized a fund-raising banquet in honor of a man who was killed in the Sept. 11, 2002, terrorist attacks on the United States. AmeriCorps donated the banquet proceeds to the Grace Centers of Hope in Pontiac, which provided Thanksgiving dinners to families in need. Currently, Wilkerson is working on a Christmas canned food drive for the Grace Centers of Hope.

"To me, the best part about AmeriCorps is helping children," Wilkerson said. "Kids aren't afraid to tell you how they feel and they don't hold back from giving you a hug, and I like to see the smiles on their faces."

Compton recalled how others provided assistance to his family as a child growing up in Pontiac. As an AmeriCorps member, he often returns the favor by devoting his time to various projects in his native city.

"I love just spending time with the people in the neighborhoods where I grew up and doing things like tutoring kids and helping with cleanup projects," Compton said. "Luckily, a lot of people took the time to help me when I was young, so it's like a ripple effect. Typically, your action creates a reaction."

"Last year we did an event called 'Paint the Town' where we helped scrape and paint a home in Pontiac. The reaction from the parent and family was wonderful. One of the children in this family was 6 years old. He saw us working and then he joined in, too. I hope he'll grow up and return the favor to another family in need some day."

Both Compton and Wilkerson were finalists for the Governor's Community Service Award. Wilkerson is one of OU's Keeper of the Dream scholarship winners for 2003, and Compton was selected in October to be the Freedom Corps greeter at the Oakland County International Airport when President George W. Bush arrived for a Republican rally.

AmeriCorps volunteers dedicate a year of service in exchange for a living allowance and, after completing 900 hours of service, they receive an education award of \$2,362.50 to pay for college or student loans.

Michigan AmeriCorps chapters have grown from nine to 26 since its inception in 1994. Since then, nearly 78,000 men and women of all ages and backgrounds from those chapters have helped solve problems and strengthen communities through 132 service projects across the state. Serving through local non-profit organizations, schools, religious organizations and other groups, these citizens tutor and mentor children, coordinate after-school programs, build homes, organize neighborhood watch groups, clean parks, recruit volunteers and accomplish other things to improve communities.

Ketelsen said the recent growth in AmeriCorps members was affected by the Sept. 11 attacks and President Bush's call for community service.

"For Oakland University, AmeriCorps plays a key role because we provide a link between students and the surrounding community," Ketelsen said. "AmeriCorps gives students an opportunity to develop leadership skills and helps students focus on how they'd like to use their degrees. The university has been very supportive since we began this program, and we're proud of the assistance we've been able to provide to various communities over the years."

For more information on national and local community service opportunities, visit the [Michigan AmeriCorps](#) Web site.

SUMMARY

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