

Learning on DCD's Horizons

Horizons is a rigorous academic program supporting under-resourced students from pre-K through 8th Grade—but its most powerful impact may be one of connection and understanding.

Ask anyone about the value of Horizons at DCD and you can assume their first response will speak to academics— and rightly so. The primary mission of Horizons, after all, is to challenge summer learning loss in under-resourced students. And while the program has been incredibly effective in this mission, its impact is not confined to academics. In tandem with its stated mission, Horizons offers an unparalleled opportunity for fostering connection and understanding within the DCD community and beyond.

For all the successes of Horizons, one of the most remarkable is the investment of its students— many of whom not only commit to the entire ten-year length of the program, but also return as volunteers or interns after their graduation. These students who do return speak invariably of the opportunity for connection the program has gifted them, especially after a period painfully devoid of it.



Amra helping with Horizons art classes

“I remember going back to school from a year in quarantine like-- how do I start conversations? Do we just say hi and talk about how our day is going? This program is really helping everyone get back to where we were.”

“Human interaction is needed!” stresses Amra Vladi, a 10th grade volunteer and Horizons alum, who has been part of the program since Kindergarten.

Many of these volunteers see the social opportunities of Horizons valuable not only in response to an isolating year; they recognize that the program consistently addresses feelings of hesitancy and social anxiety common in young students.



Felicia and Zach after assisting in a weekly Fun Friday

“I used to be a huge introvert when I was younger,” says Felicia Fox, another Horizons alum who is now in her second year as a volunteer. “A lot of people in our generation have great personalities, but we’re a little bit shy to speak out about it. Horizons helps with that. We have a chance to build connections with other students and other volunteers.” For Felicia, working one-on-one with students in Horizons at DCD has helped her realize the positive social impact she can have, helping others on a journey similar to her own. “One of the kids said to me ‘I want to be a volunteer when I grow up!’ I always thought that too, they always seemed so cool! And now here I am, a volunteer, and it’s awesome to see that.”

This aspect of the Horizons structure— that many of its volunteers are former Horizons students themselves-- speaks to the program’s effectiveness in building a true community, to which students want to continually return. Bunmi Oyedeji joined Horizons in

Kindergarten in its initial year, and stayed with the program for its entire ten-year length. She credits the relationships and friendships she built in the program as her main incentive for returning each year. “It just didn’t make sense to not come when I already have such a strong bond with the friends and teachers here,” she says. Now, after graduating high school, Bunmi has returned as an intern with Horizons. “I already had a job lined up for this summer,” she says, “but the thought of coming back— it’s Horizons! You can’t not come!” For Bunmi, the chance to connect with young students who share circumstances similar to her own is a powerful opportunity to give back what she gained from Horizons.



Bunmi smiling during a Horizons field trip

This feeling of connection offered by Horizons is felt strongly by its returning students, but it is by no means unique to them. DCD alumni are also returning to work as volunteers for Horizons, and they too recognize the value of this opportunity for connection and understanding. Luke Hotra is now a high-school Junior; having attended DCD since Kindergarten, he’s now returned for the third year in a row to serve as a Horizons volunteer. “It’s not really about my enjoyment, but on top of trying to do a good job and good work with this program, I do really enjoy working with the students,” Luke says. “I really like seeing how they’ve grown up from one summer to the next. Growing up, getting more responsible, going through a lot of the same things I went through in school.” While Luke finds himself frequently connecting with his students over their shared experiences, he also recognizes where these diverge.

“At DCD, the classes are pretty small, and you have the same kids with you going through all the grades,” Luke explains. “The experiences of these kids are a lot different. I think Horizons has given me more understanding and patience, as well as just the ability to understand and connect with different people and their experiences.”

Sophie Hiatt, another DCD alum, views her work as a volunteer in a similar light. Now a high-school Senior, Sophie sees her interest in Human Rights Law informed by her work with Horizons. “Working with these kids helps me frame different ways of life, different people,” she says. “It helps me understand different experiences, as opposed to my single perspective. I think it’s important to learn how to look at each child’s individual background, really trying to understand them and meet them where they’re at, to build that trust and those relationships.”

This blending of perspectives is embodied by many of the Horizons staff, including Sarah Mahoney, who now serves as the Academic Coordinator for Horizons. Sarah attended DCD as a student, but notes that even then, she felt the need for a diversity of connection. “I was able to attend DCD because my mom worked here,” she says. “But normally we wouldn’t have been able to afford a school like this. So to a certain extent I always felt a little on the outskirts and not always able to relate to the other kids. And I always felt personally that I related a lot more to the students from Horizons.” Sarah explains how, through her work with both DCD Summer Camp and Horizons, she was able to gain specific insight into the lives of both groups— how in some ways they were similar to her own experiences, in others wildly different. “These are things that you don’t always think about if you haven’t been through it,” she says. “Because if you don’t see it everyday, it’s easy to forget that not everyone has the same experience as you.”

Along with its volunteers, teachers, and staff, Horizons leadership is well aware of the positive impact this connection and understanding can have when different groups connect, and it’s something they hope to see more of in the future.

“Over the last few years, we’ve seen in our world a huge divide-- with social class, with race, with religion,” says Haris Kuljancic, the Executive Director of Horizons at DCD.

“A tremendous divide across the board. Growing up as a kid, you don’t naturally know that divide. You don’t see it. Until you do. And for students of color, and students of lower economic status, grappling with that identity comes a lot sooner.” Haris understands this issue from a personal perspective. “Although I came to this country as a refugee and my family grew up in a lower economic status, I’m still seen as a white male, and I’ve benefited from those privileges in ways that many of my friends growing up didn’t,” he says. “I always felt very close to my peers until I realized how privileged I was. And now I wonder how they felt.”



Haris playing basketball with Horizons students

Thankfully, Haris sees the partnership between DCD and Horizons as a powerful tool in guiding students through these challenging divides. “Independent schools are sometimes in danger of becoming bubbles, cut off from the outer community. But during the Horizons six-week summer program, we have an incredibly diverse group of students, volunteers and staff that get to know other people who aren’t just like them.”

When Haris looks at the DCD alumni who have returned to Horizons as volunteers, he sees this as an uncommon opportunity for building connection and understanding on both sides. “I think about the DCD volunteers at Horizons, and how they’re now able to bridge that divide a little bit,

and realize the value in education and the opportunities available to students, and how they can do their part to make that opportunity more available,” he explains. “And for Horizons students who may not usually feel welcome in spaces that are predominantly white, they’re able to see that these are spaces that they *are* welcome, that they’ll be treated well, and that this is achievable. And I would hope that in their lives, this is something that will become the norm for them. When they interact with places that are often considered off-limits for them, they can feel that same warmth and that belonging that they feel at Horizons and DCD.”

Haris sees a wide range of value offered by Horizons, including academic support and social skills. But when asked to consider the program’s greatest impact, he can’t overlook this opportunity for building empathy. “Learning how to coexist in the most positive way with one another, and treat each other with kindness, and respect, and fairness, and equity,” he says. “That’s something you can’t teach. That happens only through interaction.” Horizons has come a long way in its 13 years at DCD. Toward the future lies the hope to do even more. “We want to make sure students, families, faculty and staff– that everyone at DCD knows who Horizons is,” Haris says.

“You see a lot of people who want to do more,” adds Sarah. “But they don’t know how. And I think Horizons is offering a really good opportunity for faculty, students, really everybody in the community to actually do something with that.”



Sarah with Horizons 1st grader

“The program is free for the kids,” explains Sophie, “so if you have the ability to give back, any way you can, whether that’s volunteering, donating your time, or if you have the financial means to make a donation– it’s super helpful to keep all this going.”

“This program is all privately funded,” Sarah agrees. “There wouldn’t be a program if it weren’t for the donations we get. A lot of them are from family and community members of DCD. We raise most of our money that way. And I also really like to see people get actively involved. Having the high school volunteers is a big, big step in that direction.”

To see the impact of this support, we need look no further than the Horizons alumni who have returned to give back in their own ways.

“Horizons always has open arms to anyone,” Felicia says. “These kids are the future, and we want to help them be bright students, we don’t want them to be held back.”



Horizons students playing on the playground

“I feel like my time with Horizons has given me a place in the world,” agrees Bunmi. “Horizons isn’t just a summer program. It’s a family. This program is my family.”

It’s a rare match: a program that guides students and volunteers through a challenging confrontation with the world’s realities, while simultaneously offering them a welcoming, safe environment that they feel comfortable calling home. This hybrid of growth and comfort may not be common in the present world, but it is wholly necessary in shaping positive change—the type of change that lies at the core of Horizons’ and DCD’s ongoing partnership.



From left to right: Alumni come back as volunteers in the summer Horizons Program. (back row) John Hoffman '20, Amanda Hiatt '20, Summer Perry '20 (front row) Marin Reeds '20

- Kyle Ritland, Content Media Specialist

