Walk into the office of any university president and you’ll find at least one oversized check that we use for a photo op when someone gives us a large donation. It’s a souvenir of the job, like the engraved shovels we use to toss dirt at groundbreakings. One of these days, I’m going to walk into a bank with a big check like that just to see what kind of look I get when I ask to cash it.

I’ve learned recently how gratifying it can be to give away those giant checks. In December we welcomed back to campus Michelle Machusko, an RMU student who was critically wounded last year in an off-campus shooting that claimed the lives of her classmates Jonathan Gilbert and Michael Tatalovich. Michelle spent two weeks in a coma and is undergoing extensive therapy to relearn how to walk and talk.

Led by RMU senior Lindsay Schlott, students in the First Year Seminar Mentors program raised more than $3,000 to help support Michelle’s recovery. Then they threw a pizza party, invited Michelle and her mother, and presented them with an oversized check – and a real one.

Shortly before holiday break, RMU sent $2,500 to the Houston Food Bank to help victims of Hurricane Ike. The money came from the sale of T-shirts that playfully commemorated the campus power outage caused by wind storms that spun off from the September hurricane. In honor of the project, our Office of Student Life created, you guessed it, a big check.

I’m proud to share these stories, but the point is that neither is out of the ordinary for RMU students. Each year our students donate thousands of hours in community service and volunteer work. Community service is an important aspect of engaged learning, the hallmark of an RMU education. We believe what students do outside the classroom has an indispensable role in shaping their character and leadership skills.

There is an educational component to community service, which some of our faculty have weaved into their courses. Each year, nursing professor Carl Ross leads a group of students to Nicaragua, where they provide medical care to an impoverished barrio. My wife, Polly, has made the trip three times, and she’ll tell you more about RMU’s work there on the next page.

Ann Jabro and Julie Michalenko’s service learning courses in public relations and business communications this past fall helped community revitalization in Coraopolis and the Heritage Valley Health System. You can read about that, and the work our students do as mentors with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Pittsburgh, in this President’s Insider.

Volunteer service is one way for us to acknowledge and repay all the support and generosity that we have received over the years from our community, including many of you. And if I ever need to be reminded of that, there’s a big check propped in a corner of my office, waiting for me to take it to the bank.

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell’Omo, Ph.D.
Two summers ago, I accompanied Greg when he went to Managua to sign an agreement between RMU and the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (UPOLI) to provide health care to several poor communities there. Our son, Vincent, then 16, had joined us to deliver soccer equipment he collected to donate to Nicaraguan youth.

We were in a park, and Vincent couldn’t stop talking about Apple’s new iPhone. And then we saw a little boy begging for money and pointing at his bare feet. Nothing could have contrasted more vividly with the life we took for granted in the United States.

“Wow,” I said, teasing Vincent. “A pair of flip-flops would rock his world, and you’re worrying about an iPhone.”

RMU first started working with UPOLI in 2006, when Carl Ross, a university professor of nursing, came to RMU from Duquesne University, where he directed the Center for International Nursing. Carl has traveled to Nicaragua 63 times over the past 13 years, working with nursing students and volunteer organizations to provide medical care and supplies.

Each June and November, Carl and a group of RMU nursing students spend two weeks in Nicaragua. The students pay their own way, about $2,000 for the trip. Some students save from the time they enter RMU so they can make the trip before they graduate.

Students help local families and give presentations about health and safety issues. They also work at a men’s health clinic affiliated with UPOLI. Men are the predominant wage earners, toiling on coffee plantations for the equivalent of about $1,200 a year. Carl learned early in his travels that men’s health, vital to the well-being of communities, was largely overlooked.

“When a country is as poor as Nicaragua, they only have money to focus on women -- especially pregnant women -- and children. Men are not a priority,” Carl says.

As little as $1,200 a year sounds, even that does not capture the poverty in which these Nicaraguan families live. Many reside in metal shacks, without indoor plumbing and sanitation services. On the most recent trip, RMU students gave presentations to school children on fire safety, burn prevention and treatment. In the absence of garbage removal, local residents burn trash, and children are injured when they run through the burning piles.

RMU senior Joseph Ferriero, who has worked at the burn unit at West Penn Hospital, visited a burn unit in Nicaragua. “They were years behind in technology. Supplies that we would use once and throw away because they were no longer sterile, such as bandages, they used over and over,” Joseph says.

Before they went home, the RMU students threw a piñata party for the Nicaraguan children. Joseph was overwhelmed by the sheer exuberance of the children. I know how he feels. That’s what spurred me to go back after my first trip and help Carl and the students as best I can: seeing the joy the Nicaraguans express in spite of such intractable poverty.

It makes me realize that whatever tangible improvement RMU is making in the Nicaraguans’ lives, probably the greatest gift we give is hope – the knowledge that someone cares about their needs. And that’s enough to keep us coming back.
Engaged learning is one of Robert Morris University’s core values. We want our students to get involved with the world around them, because by working with and helping others, our students broaden their own learning and personal growth.

This past fall, for example, 838 Robert Morris University students donated approximately 3,400 hours in volunteer service. One of RMU’s largest community projects is a mentoring program for low-income children at the Mooncrest Neighborhood Center. The program is a collaboration with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Pittsburgh and the Felician Sisters.

Mooncrest is an impoverished Moon Township neighborhood originally built during World War II to house defense workers employed at the Neville Island shipyards.

The after-school program matches RMU students with kids in first through sixth grade in order to provide a non-denominational, faith-based environment that is safe, comfortable, and secure. It helps the children to develop mentally, socially, emotionally and physically – and to have some fun at the same time.

RMU students serve as special and trusted friends to these needy children. Each week the student volunteers (called “Bigs”) visit Mooncrest to work one-on-one with the children (called “Littles”), helping with homework and study habits; working on projects in arts and crafts, drama, music, and computers; and playing together.

The mentoring program takes place at the Mooncrest Neighborhood Center, which opened in 2004 as part of a concerted effort to create a sustainable, family-friendly community.

“The interaction with the students is wonderful,” says Sister Mary Rene Procopio, the program’s director. “Every child is partnered with a volunteer from RMU, and each week the kids can’t wait for their ‘Bigs’ to arrive. It’s a special time of bonding for the children, and it provides something in their life that’s consistent, something they can count on and depend on.”

Joey Lach is a freshman nursing major at RMU. “I decided to get involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters because I am the oldest of five children and thought I could help teach younger kids something,” Joey says. “It’s a great program. The kids get so excited and think of you as a real brother or sister. You really receive a lot more than you give.”

This spring at RMU, Joey is also organizing a Rotoract group – a student-run community service group that collaborates with the local Rotary Club.

The Office of Student Civic Engagement (OSCE), led by Donna Fetterman, coordinates RMU’s many service projects. Recent projects include hosting an on-campus blood drive with Central Blood Bank, preparing and serving meals at Light of Life Rescue Mission, assisting elderly residents with yard work in partnership with Coraopolis Community Development Foundation, and building homes with Habitat for Humanity in Beaver County.

“Community service is not just beneficial to those in need,” Donna says. “It also gives our students a chance to apply the skills they’re learning in the classroom to real-world situations, which strengthens their problem-solving and interpersonal skills.”
Jarod Shupp enrolled in a public relations course and ended up with a full-time job. Or at least that’s what it felt like.

Jarod was a student in the fall in Ann Jabro’s foundations in public relations and research course, one of two service-learning courses that RMU offered last semester. Ann’s students teamed up with the Coraopolis Community Development Foundation to study how Coraopolis can build stronger ties with RMU as part of the town’s revitalization efforts.

Their project, “Seeing Tomorrow Together,” included surveys and other research to measure perceptions of Coraopolis by the campus community – and vice versa – and learn what kinds of businesses and activities would attract RMU students, staff and faculty to Coraopolis.

The pace and workload of the class was intense, particularly for an introductory-level course. Ann says it was closer to what students could expect in a senior capstone course.

“I attempted to keep motivating and challenging students’ learning until they demonstrated fatigue or saturation,” Ann says. “These students met and surpassed my expectations on every challenge and pushed me to continually raise the bar. They were awesome.”

Jarod, a sophomore marketing major, says the class donated the equivalent of $70,000 in consulting services to the Coraopolis community. “I learned more in that class than in all my other classes,” Jarod says.

The Rev. Sam Jampetro, who leads the Coraopolis Community Development Foundation, said the RMU project has galvanized community spirit in Coraopolis. His organization has formed a community action network to act on the recommendations in the students’ report. Ann’s event planning class this spring will be working again with the group.

To support the Coraopolis project, Ann received a $2,000 grant from the Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Network for Growth in Service Learning. Lecturer Julie Michalenko received a similar grant for her course in business and professional communications. Her students organized a fundraiser for Heritage Valley Health System’s Community Health Services.

The students worked with Heritage Valley staff to plan “An Evening of Holiday Shopping,” on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving at the Mall at Robinson. For $5, patrons could shop at the mall after closing – many stores offered discounts -- and enjoy a host of family-friendly activities.

The event raised $4,000, according to Dan Murphy, vice president for institutional advancement at Heritage Valley. “The students were a great help,” Dan says.

Julie says she covered far more ground than in a conventional course. “I wanted students to see a business project from beginning to end.”

RMU junior Nazari Dorosh, who is majoring in television and video production, oversaw advertising and promotions for the event, and he shot a short video to document the project.

“I felt like this was the most I’ve learned in a communications class,” Nazari says. “I think there is so much I can take from this class into the real world.”