Penn Alumnae in Service

Women graduates share their thoughts on why they have dedicated themselves to service, in its various forms.

- Stephanie A. Urchick, C’76 - Rotary
- Nneka Kirkland, C’95 - Tutoring
- Joan Myerson Shrager, ED’60 - Art
- Jacqueline Einstein Astrof, C’93 – Consulting
- Jerilyn Keit Dressler, W’00 - Accounting

Dr. Stephanie A. Urchick, C’76

In what way do you consider yourself to be dedicated to service?
In 1991, I joined a Rotary Club in California, Pennsylvania. But a few years later I actually became a Rotarian when I began working in Rotary humanitarian service. Projects took me to local domestic areas, as well as to places I had never imagined I would visit: India, Nigeria, Singapore, Poland, Thailand and more. The benefit I get is psychological—I’m not wealthier and I don’t have more time being a Rotarian, but what I do have is plenty of psychic income.

How would you describe your role?
I served Rotary in all club and district positions, and worked for three years as a Regional Foundation Coordinator (fund development) for the Zone in which I reside. Currently I hold an international position as a Trustee of The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International. Trustees are
charged with raising money, investing funds, awarding grants, and all stewardship activities associated with the Foundation. I am one of fifteen people from around the Rotary world who serve as TRF Trustees.

**Why is serving in this role important to you?**
Serving as a Trustee allows me a unique perspective on the special work of Rotary, which is “doing good in the world.” An important part of this role is to provide inspiration to Rotarians around the globe to continue efforts in making the world a better place and fostering peace.

**What is your favorite memory related to your service in this role?**
There are many, but one of my favorite stories is about participating in a National Immunization Day in India where Rotarians were involved in giving oral polio vaccine to children. A young mother approached the line with her female child and the little girl began shaking violently. I was extremely concerned and asked the woman, “Is your child ok?” To which the mother replied, “Oh, Miss, she is fine. She has just never seen yellow hair and white skin. You look like a boogey woman to her.”

**How, if at all, did your experience at Penn impact your current service work?**
I was an international relations major at Penn, and always aspired to pursue work in a global arena. The job market, however, put me back in Western Pennsylvania in a higher education career. The ‘internationality’ of Rotary was one of the aspects of the organization that attracted me and influenced me to say “yes” when asked to consider joining.

**What advice do you have to offer to any Penn women who are reading this and are interesting in doing similar work?**
One of my favorite mantras is “life is more interesting on the other side of a ‘yes’.” When a passion presents a way for you to pursue it, say “yes” and figure out the details later. I have learned more in volunteer service than I ever learned in a classroom. Working on behalf of others, or for a cause, results in improvements in my own life. While changing the world, I have changed myself. Your passions, and your actions, can change the world. For more information on Rotary, visit [www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org).

**Nneka (Freeman) Kirkland, C’95**

In what way do you consider yourself to be dedicated to service?
I am a math educator. I teach precalculus at Temple University and I co-founded a math and science tutoring company. My service includes teaching/tutoring math. My service began during my time at Penn. While an undergraduate at Penn, I worked for the Veteran’s Upward Bound
Program, where I tutored veterans in preparation for the GED exam. I also tutored fellow classmates. After leaving Penn, I continued to tutor relatives, neighbors, family, and friends. I tutored math, reading, GED, SAT, and GMAT. I also worked for several organizations as a tutor.

Recently I co-founded Citywide Math and Science Institute. Our primary goal is to work with inner city youth who need tutoring in math and science subjects. Although we are a for profit company, we work with several non-profit organizations where we donate our time tutoring youth. We also offer free parent workshops to provide parents with information to help their children study math and science.

How would you describe your role, and its purpose?
My role is to help students learn math. Many students have difficulty understanding math concepts, especially in a classroom setting. The one-on-one time with tutors usually help students understand the areas that need strengthening. The purpose of my role is to help students get the attention they need so they can focus and concentrate on the material and learn math.

Why is serving in this role important to you?
Serving in this role is important to me because I understand math. I know how to explain math concepts in various ways to a diverse group of students. In addition to my academic training, my years of experience allowed me to explore different methods of teaching math concepts. I believe when you have a set of skills that can help others, you should use them for that purpose. The best part of serving in this role is seeing the faces of my students light up with excitement because they finally understand! This reminds me that I am in the right field.

What is your favorite memory related to your service in this role?
I have so many favorite memories, but I will choose one. I currently work with a student who feels helpless when it comes to learning math. She continually struggles to earn passing grades in her math class. At our latest session, she walked through the door and immediately announced that she passed her state assessments. She earned a high “C” and she was very happy about it. This is from a girl who usually drags into the room, slumps down into her seat, and waits for me to ask how she is doing. I learned from her mother that she wants to get to the point where she can do math on her own (without asking for help). I believe she is on her way.

How, if at all, did your experience at Penn impact your current service work?
I am in this field because of my time at Penn. One evening after tutoring a veteran, I went to visit a friend. While I was sharing my experience he looked at me with amazement. He said “you know you glow when you talk about your students.” At that moment I knew I needed to continue my path in math education. My experience at Penn shaped who I am as a math educator. Of course, the education I received is invaluable!

What advice do you have to offer to any Penn women who are reading this and are interested in doing similar work?
My advice to Penn women interested in doing similar work is to do it. It sounds very simple, but the most challenging aspect of this role is getting started. Immediately following undergraduate school I entered the work force as an administrative assistant. I continued to tutor students in math while working full time to support myself. Eventually (almost 10 years later), I had the
opportunity to return to graduate school to earn a Master of Education degree (secondary math). It took some time, but I remained focused and determined to accomplish my goals. I have exceeded those goals and my expectations. Take advantage of every opportunity offered. Explore the many resources available, learn about yourself, and network.

_In what way do you consider yourself to be dedicated to service?_

I am a professional artist. I co-founded and co-direct an art program for inner city youngsters called _The Stained Glass Project: Windows That Open Doors_ founded seven years ago. I volunteer my time teaching and spend a significant amount of personal money on the program. This program has been recognized nationally.

_How would you describe your role, and its purpose?_

I am co-director of the program. I teach, mentor and involve myself in the lives of the youngsters we teach from working in the program to taking students to cultural events, meals in restaurants, traveling with them on trips and maintaining close contact through texts and phone calls. etc.

_Why is serving in this role important to you?_

It is one of the most important things I’ve ever done in my life. The changes my partner, Paula Mandel and I have helped bring about with our kids are monumental. The relationships we have created are memorable. We have made a tremendous difference in the lives of our kids as they have in ours. I have experienced things I never dreamed of. It has changed my life. I know I have impacted the lives of these kids and have given them the support and encouragement to see some reach college or get jobs for which I have made contacts. To know this is the reason I get up every morning.

_What is your favorite memory related to your service in this role?_

In 2011 I traveled with the SGP to New Orleans to hand deliver stained glass windows to a school that had been decimated by Katrina. The whole experience of being with these young people and seeing the world through their eyes is unforgettable.

_How, if at all, did your experience at Penn impact your current service work?_

I’m not sure how it specifically impacted my current service work except that Penn has always been a source of pride for me and at one point when I dedicated my artwork for exhibition in The Graduate School of Education, I visited the Sadie Alexander school and that inspired me with the way kids could be educated if a school had all of the money and backing that Penn gives that
school. Also, having graduated from Penn as a teacher certainly impacts the teaching I do today through our program.

What advice do you have to offer to any Penn women who are reading this and are interested in doing similar work?
DO IT! Whatever your particular skill, reach out and find a program that helps people. There are many kids who desperately need a stable force in their lives. If you can read, read to kids. If you are an artist as I am, find a group that needs your talents. If you are good at math, tutor a kid.

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Jacqueline Einstein Astrof, C'93

In what way do you consider yourself to be dedicated to service?
I am the Founder and Executive Director of PennPAC (Pro bono Alumni Consulting), an organization that matches Penn alumni-volunteers into teams to provide nonprofits with strategic consulting services at no cost. PennPAC provides a tremendous service to the organizations we serve and also provides a meaningful, skills-based volunteering experience to alumni who can utilize their intellectual talents and professional skills in a rewarding way.

How would you describe your role, and its purpose?
As the founder, I have created the structure and built the team to grow PennPAC to assist an even greater number of non-profits in NYC, Philly and beyond.

Why is serving in this role important to you?
It’s great to leverage an existing resource (talented Penn alumni) for such an impactful purpose (betterment of nonprofit organizations). I am proud of what PennPAC has already accomplished and am excited about its potential to help many more nonprofits through a variety of engagement types. It has also been a great experience applying my professional background in new business development to the nonprofit sector.

What is your favorite memory related to your service in this role?
It is always an incredible feeling knowing that PennPAC's work is making a difference. A client recently told us that because of our project team's recommendations, they have been able to grow their organization to help more constituents. That is the essence of PennPAC – helping nonprofits make a bigger impact. PennPAC also hosted a one-night, high-impact event where we worked directly with a client's constituents and helped the constituents – high school seniors from an underserved area in the South Bronx – with their college interview skills. At the end of the event, it was obvious that we helped the students with much more than college interviewing;
we provided insight and information about professional careers the students hadn't known existed. I'm not sure who walked out of there feeling more rewarded by the evening, our Penn alumni-volunteers or the students from Renaissance.

**How, if at all, did your experience at Penn impact your current service work?**

When I was in college, one of my favorite things about Penn was how intelligent yet grounded and diverse I found so many of my fellow students. They were all engaged in their school work yet that was only one dimension of their very full lives. In starting a volunteer organization where volunteers would need to give of their time, talent and skills and balance their volunteer work into already full lives, I knew the Penn alumni community was the place where I would find this asset. One of the reasons PennPAC has been so successful is that Penn alumni are so passionate and committed to the Penn alumni community and the larger communities in which they live. We put together incredible project teams bursting with capability, generosity of time and a total commitment to the cause.

**What advice do you have to offer to any Penn women who are reading this and are interested in doing similar work?**

Join us! [www.pennpac.org](http://www.pennpac.org). There are various ways to participate in PennPAC including being on a project team, attending a one-night, high-impact event, starting a PennPAC affiliate in another city, and more.

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[Jerilyn Keit Dressler, W’00 – Accounting](#)

**In what way do you consider yourself to be dedicated to service?**

After spending 8 years in public accounting, I had what I would call a "mid-career crisis." In the winter of 2007, I had completed the Arts & Business Council's Business on Board program in which businesspeople learn to be effective board members of non-profit arts organizations. This was a major wake-up call for me and awakened in me something that had been dormant for some time. I felt a calling to do something with a greater good, something where I could marry my accounting skills with my passion for community service and social justice. I took 5 months off, met with many people, did a great deal of research and soul-searching, and I found that I could achieve both of my objectives by working for my current company, Your Part-Time Controller, where I do accounting and consulting for non-profits. I took a very significant pay cut but the meaningfulness of my work provides so many greater rewards. Each day I help nonprofits with their financial management so that their leaders can sleep at night and focus on what matters most: their mission. I also serve on three boards: Art-Reach (which brings the arts to people with
significant barriers to access such as disabilities and economic barriers), The Fairmount Civic Association, where I am the Secretary, and the Fairmount Community Development Corp. I have been on the board of Art-Reach for about 6 years, and I was past Treasurer. I just joined the FCA and FCDC boards this past January, where I have focused my efforts on building community support for our local public school.

**How would you describe your role, and its purpose?**

At YPTC, I work closely with boards and Executive Directors. Besides performing monthly financial reporting, I assist with cash flow management, budgets, reporting to funders, strategy decisions, and other projects. Many of my clients cannot afford high-quality finance and accounting staff so I provide those services to them but on a part-time basis. As far as my board work with Art Reach is concerned, I am a very strong believer that the arts can improve quality of life. We take for granted that we can go to a museum or buy theater tickets, when so many people have never experienced art in any way. Art-Reach serves over 17,000 people per year in the Greater Philadelphia region and I am proud to be part of that effort. Currently, I am assisting the Executive Director in refining strategic initiatives as well as in financial matters. My work with the FCA and FCDC is two-fold: I wanted to get the organization that represents the residents and the organization that represented businesses/development to collaborate more, and work better together in supporting the neighborhood public school. In just the past few months, I have gotten both organizations with similar committees to join those committees so as not to duplicate efforts and to have more people working together on the same objectives. I am also currently organizing our first annual neighborhood scavenger hunt which will raise funds for the school and build camaraderie among neighbors of all ages and cohorts. My son is not yet school age but I believe that great schools make great neighborhoods, and I want Fairmount to be a neighborhood where people stay to raise their kids, not a stopping point on their way out of Philadelphia. I have also been part of an effort to petition the school district to change the catchment lines such that the entire Fairmount neighborhood would be able to send their kids to the neighborhood school (the line currently bisects the neighborhood in half). In March, I was part of a team that testified in front of the School Reform Commission.

**Why is serving in this role important to you?**

In my job, I go home every day knowing I am helping nonprofits do what they do best. I can't think of a better way to make a living doing what I love at the same time as supporting my community. I feel that I need to be proactive in every way possible to do my part in making my community a better place for my family. I do not want to assume others will do it. If I have the power to make changes, then I will absolutely try. I feel that in the first few months of my FCA and FCDC board positions, I have been able to start to change hearts and minds about the role of these organizations (often perceived as being staid or not in the interest of the whole neighborhood). At the very least, I have been able to bring more positive visibility to both, in a pretty short period of time which is encouraging to me to keep going. I barely sleep anymore and my son asks me, "are you going to another meeting?" but in the end it is all for him, because if I can't do my part to make our community and world better, I won't be a good role model for him.

**What is your favorite memory related to your service in this role?**

When I was pregnant and about to go out on maternity leave, both of my clients threw me
surprise baby showers. I was literally moved to tears by both because they were so unexpected (and very well planned!), they both included almost all the organization's staff, and they were indicators to me how much my work was appreciated, and how they valued me and considered me part of their team.

**How, if at all, did your experience at Penn impact your current service work?**
I was very involved on Penn's campus in various organizations (Penn Dance, Tri Delta, various accounting and honor societies, Wharton Women), and I remember how alive and connected to my community that made me feel. I feel that way now in my current roles, and I couldn't be happier.

**What advice do you have to offer to any Penn women who are reading this and are interested in doing similar work?**
Figure out as soon as you can what makes you happy in life. Determine what gives you that inner glow. Go after it in all aspects of your life, especially in your everyday work. Your career should provide you with as many, if not more, non-monetary rewards as monetary ones.