

By Lydia Spann

As it turns out, the Good Samaritan is one of the most resourceful characters in the Bible. He is remembered as an individual who was willing to go out of his way to lend a helping hand to someone in need, regardless of the person's condition and characteristics.

Aside from his commendable compassionate heart, what the Good Samaritan did really wasn't all that revolutionary. Think about it. Everything he used to help the hurting man was something already present in the community. The innkeeper already had the inn; he already had the donkey; he already had remedies for the man's wounds. The Good Samaritan didn't offer anything to the man that wasn't already in existence, he just sacrificed his time and care and brought all of the resources together to connect the man with the help that he needed. The Good Samaritan didn't reinvent the wheel—he just partnered with the community in a different way to make something happen that wasn't happening before.

This same phenomenon is happening in Waco right now. Organizations across multiple industries are being brought together in partnerships to create positive and effective change in our community. This system of partnerships is spearheaded by Prosper Waco, a collective impact initiative that was launched almost two years ago.

"Nothing new was built in the story [of the Good Samaritan]. The outcome of the help that the man who was dying received was provided because of a partnership—not because of a solo act," Director of Community Engagement for Prosper Waco Liz Ligawa said.

Prosper Waco's collective impact initiative is an innovative approach that involves consolidating and building upon the efforts of existing nonprofits and community leaders to measurably improve the lives of the people of the Greater Waco community.

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The recent sweep of collective impact initiatives across the nation began in 2011 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Researchers at FSG, a consulting firm for large-scale, social change, along with partnering organizations, created and successfully implemented a highly structured process to unite the efforts of more than 300 nonprofit, business, government and foundation leaders. "Collective impact" is defined as organizations from different sectors agreeing to solve a specific social problem using a common agenda, aligning their efforts and using common measures of success.

"The initiative is designed to bring our focuses together instead of staying individual," Ligawa said. "The initiative operates from organizations that already exist."

Waco is home to over 100 nonprofit organizations. However, 29.4 percent of our population currently lives under the federal poverty level. Collective impact is one approach to bridging the gap between the helping communities and the issue of poverty they are mutually striving to tackle.

One of the results of Waco's collective impact movement thus far is Project Link, a response to the challenge of increasing the rate of post-secondary success for Waco-area students. Project Link began in the fall of 2015 out of a grant from The Bernard and Audre Rapoport Foundation to help Waco-area high school students and their families in chartering a more assured and successful post-secondary journey through intense one-on-

one college, career and financial advising. The students receive continued support until completion of their college degree through College Outreach Specialists at McLennan Community College and Texas State Technical College.

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For college students living in Waco only four years, a similar challenge arises. Our cultural focus on the individual, especially in a university setting through emphasis on self-discovery, discourages the kind of collaboration that Prosper Waco is built on, Ligawa said.

“Getting out of that isolation is one of the things that’s a little bit harder at the beginning of the collective impact model, because that’s what we’re asking people to do,” Ligawa said.

Making an effort to get to know the community in which you are living is Ligawa’s advice for college students who are interested in becoming involved with collective impact and making a dent in Waco’s poverty rate.

“My involvement in the community made me so grateful for the education I was receiving and made me feel obligated to use it for something that will make others’ lives better,” recent graduate of Baylor’s department of journalism Andrea Morgan said. Throughout her years at Baylor, Morgan was involved with AVANCE-Waco, a nonprofit that works in at-risk communities to raise graduation rates by offering a dual-education program for mothers and their children. AVANCE-Waco is a Prosper Waco affiliate.

“I just graduated in August and I see great things happening in Waco,” Morgan said. “I would love to be a part of some of those things.” Morgan plans to remain in Waco for several years.

Becoming involved with Waco’s collective impact initiative provides college students with an opportunity to get to know their community beyond the entertainment it offers. Prosper Waco does not provide direct services, but partners with a multitude of organizations in the community that do. Communities In Schools, a dropout prevention program that serves over 3,500 at risk students locally, is a Prosper Waco affiliate.

“Students can become mentors, AmeriCorps members or tutors as work-study employees or volunteers,” Tutoring Manager at Communities In Schools Ethan Talley said. “Aside from gaining hands-on experience with students, tutors get to work with some of the most inspiring kids in Central Texas. What tutors learn from interacting with students is the most valuable part of the experience.”

Mentoring has been a proven tool to successfully help youth graduate high school and pursue post-secondary opportunities. Several Prosper Waco affiliates provide opportunities for students to get involved through mentoring, including the LEAD program sponsored by the Greater Waco Chamber, CASA of McLennan and Hill Counties and Kids Hope USA, among others.

Prosper Waco’s website provides information about other volunteering opportunities with partnering organizations for students or community members.

“I would encourage students to get out of the five mile radius that they stay and in and really try to explore the city beyond entertainment,” Ligawa said. “Be curious about what you are seeing—that’s when you get to notice the ridges and the ripples and the treasures of the community that you’re in. If you’re not curious, you’ve already made up your mind about what you’re seeing.”