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Mask-making mission

As the College pivoted into a virtual working and learning environment earlier this spring, the supervisors of student employees whose on-campus work had disappeared faced a quandary.

How to find creative ways to keep their students gainfully employed?

St. Scholastica Theatre costume designer Sasha Howell set up her student employees to make masks for medical personnel and workers deemed essential by the government.

"We were trying to find ways for students to work from home," she said. "What we're doing is so hands-on."

She's excited that sewing has been elevated to new heights as a useful skill. "It feels great," Howell said.

Before campus shut down, she gathered material and equipment to help four of her students start making masks from home. Her kits included patterns, fabric, and extra sewing machine needles. She was even able to rent out sewing machines for them.

Howell serves as an on-call, remote adviser to the students as needed.

"If they need tutorials, if they're having trouble with the sewing machine, I've become that person who's there to help them out," she said. She's been busy making masks herself, as well, producing them for area organizations including Viewcrest Nursing Home in Duluth, the Solway Volunteer Fire Department in Cloquet and Summit School preschool.

The idea spread when Howell contacted Senior Financial Aid Counselor Jonna Marholz, who is in charge of student employment on campus.

"She got really excited about it," Howell said.

Marholz reached out to a larger group of existing student employees to see if there was greater interest in mask making as a way to continue their paid employment.

"I thought it would be a great way for students to do something for their communities," Marholz said.

Like Howell, she helped set students up with the materials and instruction they would need to make masks.

"The biggest hurdle was elastic," she said. "That's so hard to get."

About 28 students are taking part in the effort. Marholz encourages them to reach out to local organizations in their own communities to learn where the greatest needs are for masks.

"It's amazing the number of sites that students are donating these masks to," she said.

The students report that the work is gratifying, and a welcome break from their digital existence of online classes and Zoom meetings.

"They're not looking at a screen, they're not typing on a keyboard," Marholz said. "They're physically doing something, knowing that they're helping other people; it's just very rewarding for them."

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A stash of masks made by Annie Bachschneider and her family.

Annie Bachschneider, a junior organizational leadership major from Virginia, MN, was already making masks as a family project. Her family's efforts have already produced more than 750 masks.

"We are able to do so many because it really is a family effort with all of us working to do it," Bachschneider said. They have donated to Iron Range clinics, credit unions, banks, food banks, and other groups at the county and state level - as well as to "friends, coworkers, and strangers."

The initiative has helped with her family's mental health, she said.

"It makes all of us feel better knowing that our family, friends, and everyone else we have donated to know that it can help them stay safe."

Sophia Krikava of Cloquet has made it a family endeavor as well.

"It's been a very fun project to do with my mom while helping the community in some way," she said.

Madissen Burns of Watertown, MN, a junior biochemistry major, had never sewn before. That didn't deter her.

"I really was feeling useless sitting at home," she said, "so once I got an email from CSS offering the unique work study, I took it," she said. "The masks are very simple and easy to make, and I was able to catch on pretty quickly."

She said it's very meaningful to be able to do her part to help essential workers.

"They are the ones fighting on the front lines of this pandemic," she said.

She has been donating most of her masks to a local clinic in Waconia, MN.

"It is amazing to see how appreciative they are," she said.

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