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PR for nonprofits

Student group has paying customers but offers free publicity to service agencies

By Vic Cantu

For the past two decades, a student-led public-relations group at Chico State University has quietly been helping local nonprofit service agencies while providing valuable hands-on experience for its members.

Last semester the outfit, Tehama Group Communications, celebrated its 20th anniversary with a series of events highlighted by a two-day series of appearances, lectures and get-togethers Oct. 14-15 featuring successful Chico State public-relations alumni.

TGC offers PR students direct experience planning, designing and creating public-relations tools for business clients, but it also has helped numerous semi-impoverished nonprofits further their goals by creating business plans, designing brochures, putting up websites and holding special promotional events.

“Among our many paying clients, we also try to help at least one local nonprofit group free of charge every semester,” said TGC’s faculty adviser and PR professor Debra Johnson. “It helps North State companies who really need it and gives our students actual, hands-on experience.”

The lucky recipient of their gratis assistance during the fall 20th-anniversary semester was the Chico Alzheimer’s Association, North Valley. TGC helped call attention to and increase participation in the group’s annual Memory Walk fundraiser in Bidwell Park Oct. 9.

“TGC helped us greatly by generating awareness through campus marketing and by registering and surveying participants at the event,” said Ashley Gordon, the Alzheimer’s Association’s



The students in TGC not only designed posters and programs for Catalyst’s grand opening (below), they also pitched in to spiff up the shelter’s grounds (above).

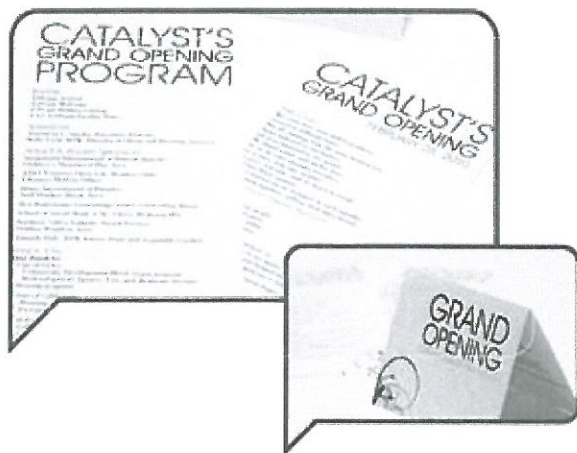
Photo courtesy of TGC

special-events director. “They helped raise official registration from 1,400 to 2,000.”

Among the eight to 12 spring-semester clients of TGC will be the nonprofit Boys and Girls Club of Chico. Johnson says her group plans to create a multi-media newsletter for them to gain much-needed public support and funding, all at no charge.

Johnson says TGC’s free work for non-profits is the same quality as the work they do for paying clients such as the Office of Diversity, the College of Communication and Education and CAVE. These clients generally receive a better rate than they would if hiring a non-student PR firm. The fees are used to cover TGC’s operating expenses and fund a \$1,000 scholarship.

The approximately 15-20 TGC students each semester are not paid, but they receive class credit and vital experience. The vast majority of them are PR majors, but they can include students from news-editorial, graphic design and media arts. Their offices are in the TGC room on the third floor of Tehama Hall, which is one of the only dedicated student PR rooms in the nation, Johnson said.



Less than a week after the Memory Walk, on Thursday, Oct. 14, the first of the 20th-anniversary alumni gatherings saw 20-30 public relations grads speaking and sharing their experiences to students in several classes throughout the day.

The following day started with several seminars at the Career Center hosted by the alumni. They focused on subjects such as writing the most effective résumés and landing jobs during the current recession. The day concluded with a social at the Chico Women’s Club featuring the alumni along with many displays and tables. The intention was to help students acquire career

leads and to create lasting, professional friendships with the alumni and each other.

Other events during the semester featured student field trips to various California companies with staffs that included Chico State PR alumni. One visit was to the San Francisco offices of alumna Vanessa Bortnick. She is the senior director of communications and oversees public relations for the Kimpton national chain of swank hotels. Another jaunt took students to the national offices of web browser giant Mozilla in Mountain View.

The newly appointed TGC general manager for spring semester, Megan McCourt, was inspired by the trips. “Visiting Mozilla was awesome,” she said. “There were two Chico State alumni there, and they really treated us great.”

Johnson agreed that such cooperation is highly beneficial. She was a member of TGC at its inception in 1990. After graduating from Chico State in 1992, she worked for clients such as Microsoft and Dell while employed by the PR firm Waggener Edstrom Worldwide.

“Chico State PR alumni are incredibly passionate about helping our students with any advice and help they need. We call it ‘PR pride,’ ” Johnson said.

Johnson has big plans for future field trips, including visits to the PR agencies of the San Francisco Giants and five New York agencies, such as Tiffany & Co. Students would be expected to pay their own way on these excursions.

McCourt, a senior majoring in news-editorial as well as PR, is excited to be taking over the reins as general manager. She served as TGC's editorial director during the fall 2010 semester.

McCourt said she greatly appreciates the enthusiasm and involvement of her fellow students. She herself put in 200 hours of work for TGC during the fall. She said she is eager to shake things up for the group by redesigning the offices and creating a different, yet positive atmosphere.

A previous TGC client who sings the praises of the group is Molly Heck, the client and housing services director for Catalyst Domestic Violence Services.

Heck said TGC was incredibly helpful in getting Catalyst's new HAVEN shelter started at both the groundbreaking and the grand-opening ceremonies over the past year and a half. HAVEN is a 10,000-square-foot, 28-bed housing center that temporarily houses victims of domestic violence along with their children.

"They went above and beyond the call of duty when Debra brought a lawn mower, a weed-whacker and 10 to 15 students to help out at the groundbreaking," she said.