

## Student-led project rethinks community service

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A group of Tulane University students, from left, Praveena Fernes, Peri Levine and Paloma Pinto, spend a Monday evening with girls at Raintree House, a residence in uptown New Orleans for girls between the ages of 10 to 17 years old who are in need of a therapeutic treatment program. “Something that is important when you are doing service is knowing the community that you are entering, and the intersectional factors that this group of people is going to bring with them,” says Fernes. Not pictured are Lipaz Avigail and Kate Kersting, who are involved with the program. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Every Monday, a group of young women from Tulane University watches movies, hosts sleepovers, cooks dinner and attends home basketball games with girls from

[Raintree House](#), a residence for girls who have been displaced from their homes.

These students are a part of Project Raintree, a student-led initiative that has been active under the Center for Public Service (CPS) and the Community Action Council for Tulane University Students (CACTUS) since 2009.

This year, Project Raintree is at the forefront of redesigning the community-service model by rethinking the way it trains its members as community volunteers. Praveena Fernes, a Tulane sophomore and co-director for the project, calls this the “CPS methodology.”

Volunteers for Project Raintree serve as mentors to a group of girls age 10 to 17 and are expected to commit to the project for at least one year.

“Ninety percent of our job is showing up and providing that consistent form of love, and forging that trust that is so often lacking in their lives,” says Fernes. “It’s like a sisterhood in some ways.”

Fernes and her co-director Kate Kersting, a Tulane junior, wanted to create an even greater sense of sisterhood between mentors and mentees, who typically come from a range of social backgrounds. Project Raintree will be partnering with the new [Community Engagement Advocate \(CEA\) program](#), which the Center for Public Service runs, to host training workshops with its new members.

These workshops will help students gain knowledge of the community they are engaging, and develop a sense of civic responsibility beyond a simple charity mind frame, developing empathy rather than sympathy for their service clients, according to the advocate program.

Project Raintree’s ultimate goal is to move from an existing charity-centered community service model towards a more partnership-centered model, says Fernes, who also works as a community engagement advocate.

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