

Person to Person

'Old' technology creates new connections for students, alumni and parents

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Nearly every American owns a mobile phone, according to recent research, but fewer and fewer of us use telephone *calls* as our main way of communicating. “I’ll give you a ring” has been replaced by “I’ll shoot you a text,” and you’re more likely to be tweeted at or tagged than to answer a call and have a conversation. New technology and social media are turning the old-fashioned phone call into something of a cultural relic. And

calls from an unknown number? According to recent research, the majority of Americans don't ever answer those.

But at UNH, students, alumni and parents are bucking that societal trend — and making some great connections in the process.

This past academic year, when so much was uncertain, when quarantines and lockdowns and six-feet-apart became the new normal, the UNH Student Philanthropy Center (known formerly as the UNH Phonathon) brought people together. The program, run by the Office of Annual Giving, has student employees calling alumni and parents to share news about the school and invite them to make a philanthropic gift. This year, the program saw huge success, raising more support than it has in the last four years, according to Jackie Overton, managing director of development.

The program operates out of Nesmith Hall and employs dozens of students who work as callers, managers, and supervisors, in four-hour shifts a couple days each week during the school year.

Overton and student-managers say the goal is a great connection with whoever they chat with during a given shift, and these conversations are largely unscripted, which gives students the freedom to share their stories.

During the last school year, the phone calls took on a new importance as students found those on the other end of the line were curious about how UNH was navigating the pandemic and wanting to know how students were handling the stress and uncertainty. Linsey Maloof '23, one of the three student-managers, says parents shared that the callers even helped bridge the communication gap between parents and their college-aged children, who might not often be in touch with details of their daily college lives.

Parents enjoy hearing about non-pandemic updates, too, like new programs and opportunities available to undergrads. Alums are eager to hear about the UNH of today as much as they enjoy sharing their own stories of what the UNH of five, 15, or 50 years ago was like, says Morgan Bowles '23, another student-manager.

Managers recognize that pandemic loneliness might have played a role in the uptick in gifts made through the student callers, with people feeling lonely likely being more willing to talk with a stranger. But students say whatever the reason, the conversations gave them a chance to bond with the parents and alumni who answered their calls. Maloof notes she's had a few alumni who have said they hadn't intended on making a gift, but they appreciated the break from the isolation, and so wanted to return the favor by making a gift to the university.

Bowles says in addition to the great UNH stories she hears, she's learned valuable networking skills. "I am a very talkative person, but the idea of talking to strangers all day used to be a little scary," the psychology major admits. "Now I feel fully comfortable; I know how to start a conversation and even carry it a little bit, when I need to."

Maloof agrees, saying as a nursing major, she's gotten great advice from professionals in the nursing field. "I learned so much from the alumni I was talking to whether it was

something at UNH — learning about new places to study, or cool things to do in Portsmouth — or my career, like how to follow in their footsteps into the specialty I want, advice on how to get through nursing school ... it's all been so valuable to me.”

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