Congratulations to our Star of the Month for February 2021, Katie Nelson from the School of Nursing. During the pandemic, Katie has been serving our community by volunteering with Civic Works to deliver food for older community members who are homebound. We spoke with her about her experience and how service has shaped her development as a nurse.

Tell us a little bit about yourself. What program are you enrolled in? What brought you to nursing?

I am a hospice nurse and second-year PhD student in the School of Nursing. I always knew I wanted to work in hospice and/or with older adults. Nursing was an obvious choice because it allows me to walk alongside patients and families and help give them a good end-of-life experience - however that looks for them, which is truly an honor.

What have you been doing with Civic Works and how has your service been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

COVID-19 has invigorated me to lend a helping hand where I can. Civic Works was looking for assistance delivering food to homebound older adults - an opportunity I couldn’t pass up! Despite having to do contactless drop-offs, it is still such a treat to be able to wave and say hello as I drop off peoples’ food boxes. Even brief social interactions can make such a difference, particularly during this time where so many are feeling isolated. In December, my friend and I dressed up and at each drop-off we sang holiday carols for the clients (from a safe distance with masks on!).

How does your service shape your development as a health care professional? What do you enjoy about or gain through community service?

I am a firm believer in being present wherever your feet are planted, and part of that involves engaging in the community. In some ways, it feels like an extension of my role as a nurse, helping to improve social determinants of health within the community. However, it has also played a huge role in my personal and professional development, as I have been able to collaborate and network with various stakeholders, learn new skills, and interact with such unique, interesting people.

How have you been working with other students at the SON and other health professional schools to get them thinking about community engagement?

I serve on the SOURCE Student Governing Board; and I am also the Professional Development Chair for the PhD Student Organization in the SON. Both roles involve educating students about community engagement and various opportunities available to them as students. I serve as a mentor for several Master’s Entry-to-Practice students, and I always encourage them to seek out service opportunities that align with their personal and professional goals.

What advice would you give to other students who are interested in volunteering but need to balance with rigorous academic programs?

Carve out a consistent studying routine, but also build in time for things that fill up your cup! The best nurses, physicians, and other health care professionals I know are all involved in things outside of their job. Finding the balance requires a certain level of self-awareness, but you can always make time for things that are important to you.