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Empowering Local Communities

INTRODUCTION

By Victor Rubin, Ph.D.

Dr. Victor Rubin is the director of research for PolicyLink, a national nonprofit research, communications, capacity building, and advocacy organization dedicated to advancing policies to achieve economic and social equity based on the wisdom, voice, and experience of local constituencies. He was director of the Office of University Partnerships (OUP) in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) from May 1999 through August 2000. Prior to that appointment, he served as adjunct associate professor of city and regional planning at the University of California, Berkeley, and staffed the University-Oakland Metropolitan Forum, a multicampus partnership based at that university.



Dr. Rubin

Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) programs have provided opportunities for community residents of all ages to develop skills and knowledge in subjects as diverse as computer mapping, financial management, grassroots organizing, and local history. When individuals master new subjects, either to start or advance their careers or to become more effective community leaders, something greater than personal education is taking place. These residents are gaining new capacities and tools that enable them to affect the public decisions that shape their neighborhoods. As residents acquire these new capacities, the community-based organizations with which they work also are strengthened. In these instances, COPC programs have contributed to the individual and collective empowerment of residents living in the most disenfranchised communities in the country.

There are at least four types of COPC-sponsored activities that contribute to personal and community empowerment. First, many partnerships are helping residents develop their personal capacities and readiness to succeed at family life or education. Financial literacy, parenting skills, and customized support for nontraditional college applicants are among the topics addressed by the partnerships profiled in the following pages. Many other COPC grantees are carrying out similar initiatives.

A second type of empowerment supported by COPC projects includes instruction and field experiences that directly help residents pursue new careers. In many cases, these careers are in neighborhood-based human services, such as health education or counseling, for which strong field experiences are both essential to the student and valuable to the community. In addition, many COPC

projects have facilitated innovative service-learning opportunities in the liberal arts, the sciences, and professional programs. These service-learning placements are not just isolated volunteer jobs or opportunities for personal reflection. Rather, they provide students with the opportunity to observe and comprehend their own contributions to a coherent neighborhood revitalization effort.

As these COPC-supported educational activities get underway, the division between local residents and college students often disappears. Indeed, local residents often *are* the students. Students engaged through COPC in local neighborhoods often grew up in those neighborhoods, and many others grew up in the city in which the neighborhood is located. The success of these students, especially when they embark on careers that keep them engaged with the community, is its own form of empowerment.

A third kind of empowerment provided by COPC programs concerns community organizing and leadership development. These programs have taught young people and adults in many cities how to canvass neighbors, analyze issues, formulate strategies, advocate for change, and build organizations. Most of these grassroots mobilizations start with small but pressing issues and advance over time to more complex policy issues, adding to the students' cumulative skills and experience along the way. In one city, an effort that began when a few neighbors protested inadequate trash collection grew to the point where the neighbors, and their university partners, were building new parks, creating new community development corporations, and exerting significant influence on city policy. Other COPC programs have created opportunities for emerging community leaders to take advantage of the university's courses, computers, libraries, and other resources. In return, these leaders offer their own knowledge and experience to students and faculty.

The fourth kind of empowerment involves the innovative, community-based research that is being carried out by many COPC programs. Through these research activities, local residents participate in urban planning, social science, or environmental science projects at all stages, from problem identification through data collection and analysis, to final presentations. Young people and adults in cities across the country have learned how to use geographic information systems, water and soil sampling techniques, household survey methods, and many other research tools. Residents who obtain these skills and experiences are rewarded on a personal level, and their organizations are empowered to deal more effectively with the complex world of policymaking. These skills remain in the community well after the initial COPC grant has been completed and, in many cases, resident leaders have trained their successors. Community-based participatory approaches are gradually gaining a stronger foothold in the funding and conduct of policy-relevant research in public health, urban planning, sociology, and many other fields. The capacity that COPC and similar programs have built has been central to that growth.

These four types of empowerment, engendered through COPC, embody much more than the traditional "extension" functions of the college or university; rather, they are designed to promote constructive community change. The exchange of knowledge and insights between campus and community is

An effective partnership requires ongoing openness, creativity, and the willingness of all partners to adjust when circumstances change.

mutual, for faculty members and university students gain at least as much from their interactions as do local residents. In some cases, university or college curricula change in response to what local residents bring to the exchange. University rewards for effective teaching, research, and service may be altered as well.



Partnerships that contribute to the empowerment of local residents should not be expected to continue indefinitely in the way that they were established. Just as a good university course is continually being updated in response to changes in the field and in the classroom, an effective partnership requires ongoing openness, creativity, and the willingness of all partners to adjust when circumstances change. Faculty and staff, as well as neighborhood leaders, may move on, the demands for job-related skills may change, and opportunities for funding may rise and fall based on political and economic trends. Therefore, partnerships started or energized by COPC need to support flexible organizations that can adapt to a changing environment.

A 10-year perspective on the early COPC partnerships, including the one that this writer managed, confirms the wide range of changes that can take place within these partnerships over time. Key individuals moved on, priorities and social context changed substantially, and many of the names and formal structures of the original grant-funded activities have been altered. However, more importantly, there are plenty of indicators that growth in community capacity has been sustained. Local leaders continue to draw upon skills and resources they first obtained through the COPC partnership. New alliances among community groups have been formed by veterans of previous COPC-sponsored activities. New joint ventures with the university have been negotiated by community leaders from a position of wisdom about how the system can work to their benefit. In my current position, I am working with professionals who were trained as graduate students through the COPC project 10 years ago and are now in positions of authority in city government and community organizations.

Campus-community partnerships are here to stay, that much is clear. Once a standard for reciprocity in partnerships has been experienced, and once changes to curriculum and research have been instigated, they leave a permanent imprint on institutions of higher education. There are higher expectations for community-focused work within universities and colleges, as well as an important recognition that there is no going back to the old ways of relating to the community. ■

Part I: Empowering Local Residents

University of Illinois at Springfield

Graduate Student Uses Classroom Learning to Establish Neighborhood Association



Deidra Lockhart

Deidra Lockhart has fond childhood memories of visiting her grandmother in the Eastside neighborhood of Springfield, Illinois. “It used to be a beautiful neighborhood where people walked down their streets and visited each other,” says Lockhart about the predominantly African American community.

Today’s reality is quite different. “The neighborhood is facing lots of difficulties,” says Lockhart. “It has a high crime rate. Drugs are being sold from abandoned houses. People are dumping trash in the streets. There is fighting in the streets. There is a lot of negativity.”

That negativity was a real culture shock for members of Lockhart’s family, who moved to Eastside in May 1999 from another part of the city. Lockhart is now working hard to change Eastside, and her children’s perception of it, by organizing residents and establishing a neighborhood association there. In the process, Lockhart is making full use of the skills she acquired while earning her bachelor’s degree in social work at the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS).

Lockhart, who is currently pursuing a master’s degree in human services at UIS, got her first taste of community organizing during a practicum social work class that she took as an undergraduate. Through her coursework, Lockhart saw firsthand how residents in the Mather Wells neighborhood, which borders her own neighborhood, banded together to reclaim their streets. “Seeing these changes taking place so close to her own neighborhood . . . really inspired Deidra,” says Sandra Mills, associate director of the COPC at UIS.

Meeting Timothy Rowles, executive director of The Springfield Project (TSP), also inspired Lockhart. TSP is a nonprofit organization that focuses on empowering residents to achieve neighborhood revitalization. “He gave me hope,” says Lockhart about a presentation that Rowles gave to her practicum class. “He let me know that while it might seem that the neighborhood has gone down and . . . [can’t] be brought back, it can be, if every one strives for it.”

Community Organizing

TSP and the COPC guided Lockhart as she and fellow residents established the Spears Wilson Edwards Neighborhood Association. During the process, Lockhart discovered that a group called the Eastside Neighborhood Association

already represented the area. After attending several meetings, however, Lockhart determined that the Eastside Association's 8-square-block area was too large to actively engage residents in improving their neighborhood. She decided to establish a new association that would target a smaller, three-block area. During an undergraduate internship as a community organizer at TSP, she honed the skills she would need to carry out the job. "I learned a lot working at TSP," says Lockhart. "They really helped impart the skills I needed [for] organizing. I learned how to talk to people." Those communication skills came in handy during fall 2002 when Lockhart began knocking on doors and handing out fliers advertising the new association.

"The only way I knew how to get people to come to the meetings was to go door-to-door," says Lockhart. "As I knocked on doors, I found a lot of people that I knew from when I was younger and came to visit my grandmother. I really didn't know that these people were still here. For instance, I knocked on one door and I found out that my friend's grandmother still lived in the house. I just didn't know she lived here because she never came out."

Lockhart's hard work paid off when the association's first meeting was attended by 30 people, mostly concerned homeowners and elderly residents who had lived in the neighborhood all their lives. Those residents have bonded among themselves and have agreed that "we are not going to allow others to take over our neighborhood," says Lockhart. In addition, the association has been able to open the lines of communication with the city of Springfield; the police officer assigned to the Eastside neighborhood regularly attends the association's meetings. The association is now working with the city to decrease illegal dumping of trash and appliances, improve lighting in alleys, and report drug activity and code violations. In addition, the COPC and TSP are lending support to help the association remain effective.

"The COPC and TSP wanted to get involved in this neighborhood for a long time, but we didn't have local leadership to work with," says Mills. "Deidra has provided us that link." Mills believes that Lockhart's ability to rally residents is due to her internal motivation. "She is really focused and doesn't give up on her goals even in the face of adversity."

The Spears Wilson Edwards Neighborhood Association still faces the challenge of keeping residents involved in its work, particularly elderly residents who have difficulty getting out of their homes. Lockhart is working to meet this challenge by connecting with residents through phone calls and visits and keeping members informed about association business when they cannot make it to meetings.

Despite the challenges, the association is getting stronger because residents want to make their neighborhood a better place to live. "A lot of the residents remember what the neighborhood used to be like," says Lockhart. "We want it to be that type of place again. We want a clean neighborhood where the houses are taken care of. We want to see revitalization and new housing. We want a good place to raise our children."

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University of Nebraska Omaha

Immigrant Couple Finds Support for Parenting



Juana and Jesus Chavez

Juana and Jesus Chavez of Omaha, Nebraska, are proud of their children and want to help them realize their dreams. However, as immigrants from Mexico who speak little English, the couple has discovered that parenting can be quite a challenge, especially in the United States.

“I think that if you raise children in Mexico, there is more support from the family, because the family plays a vital role,” says Juana. “Usually the mothers stay home and care for the kids. In the United States, I have to work also to provide for my children. In doing that, the youth tend to raise themselves without the mother or the family playing such a large role.”

The Chavez family is luckier than most immigrant families because they have been able to get help in raising their family and making sure their children succeed. They both meet regularly with counselors and attend parenting classes offered by the Family Mentoring Project (FMP), an outreach to Hispanic families sponsored by the School of Social Work at the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO). In fact, FMP is usually the first point of contact when the couple has questions of any type, whether they are related to work, school, or family issues.

A Long Journey

Jesus and Juana met, married, and lived in Mexico before Jesus moved to California in 1977 to provide a better life for his family. Juana remained in Mexico with the couple’s two children until 1982 when she joined Jesus in California, leaving the children with relatives. Unable to find steady work on the west coast, the couple moved to Omaha at the suggestion of Juana’s brother and began working at the meat-packing plant where they are still employed. (Juana is a cleaning woman at the plant and Jesus fillets beef.) They eventually saved enough money to bring their two older children to Omaha. (The couple now has five children, three of whom were born in the United States.)

“Both Juana and Jesus are very hard-working individuals,” says FMP Community Coordinator Alberto Cervantes. “They get up early in the morning and work until late in the afternoon, but they also remain involved in the community. They attend church and parenting classes, and they do this on their own personal time. They do this so the family can stay together and adjust to the culture here. I admire that.” Cervantes says that many immigrant families are intimidated by the fact that they do not know English and are unfamiliar with their new culture. “Some would rather seclude themselves,” he says, “but Juana and Jesus are willing and eager to inform themselves and immerse themselves in the community.”

Parenting Classes

It was one of the Chavez children who, in 1996, invited her parents to learn more about FMP and motivated them to take advantage of the project's services. Then a curious 10-year-old Tanya Chavez was full of questions that Juana and Jesus had trouble discussing with her. When Tanya brought the couple to hear Cervantes give a presentation at a local church, they were impressed by the range of services that FMP could offer them.

"We took a parenting class called *Padres y Compadres*," says Juana. "This class helped us to have more peace and better communication within our family. There are resources available at the school and in the community, including this program, that parents can use to help their children."

The Chavez family belonged to the first group of 50 families that participated in FMP. Established with HUD funds, FMP now is also supported by the U.S. Department of Justice, the Chicano Awareness Center in Omaha, and the UNO COPC, which helps pay Cervantes' salary. (He is the program's only full-time employee.)

Originally, FMP relied on UNO students and professionals to mentor adolescents enrolled in the program. The mentors spent time with the children, organized activities for them, and served as role models. Over the years, however, FMP has adapted to the changing needs of the community. Now, as new groups of families join the project, Cervantes listens to their problems and determines what services can help them succeed. Those services might include counseling, professional treatment, education, or referral to another resource.

A strong reputation in the south Omaha community helps FMP reach out to Hispanic families, says Cervantes. "It's easy for us to work with the community because we have that trust, we have that experience," he says. "Families tend to open up a lot easier with us because they've heard information about us so they feel comfortable with us. Word of mouth plays an important role in our tight-knit community."

Parents like Juana and Jesus also lend credibility to FMP, says Cervantes. Juana takes it upon herself to let coworkers and friends know about FMP and other community resources. Both she and Jesus know firsthand the challenges facing Mexican immigrants in the United States so they are eager to help others.

"Because the language and the culture are different, many families isolate themselves even further," says Jesus, who offers sage advice to other immigrants he meets.

"Do not lose patience," he says. "You will face many obstacles, [but] keep moving forward, keep educating yourself. There are a lot of things out there parents can do with their kids. There are a lot of people who are willing to help, if you are willing."

For more information, contact Alberto Cervantes, community coordinator at the Family Mentoring Project phone (402) 733-2720, ext. 229, e-mail albertocervantes@mail.unomaha.edu. ■

Santa Ana College

Project Provides Information and Opportunity for Hispanic Mothers



Francesca Cancian

A housekeeper decided to enroll in Santa Ana College (SAC) in Santa Ana, California, after picking up a flier at her daughter's preschool. Determined to overcome her very limited English skills and a difficult home life with an alcoholic husband, she enrolled in basic English and math classes, and now has only one more semester to complete at SAC before transferring to California State University, Fullerton, to pursue her degree in education.

The housekeeper-turned-student reached her educational goals with help from the Latina Mothers Project, a participatory research project designed to help low-income Hispanic women in Santa Ana pursue degrees at SAC. The research project, which ran from 2001–03, gave UCI sociology professor Dr. Francesca Cancian the opportunity to document the educational and support needs of Hispanic women. It also helped study participants improve their chances for a better life and a better job.

Many low-income Hispanic women do not attend college because they have children and take on family responsibilities early in life, says Cancian. Apprehension about college can also stand in the way of educational advancement. Participants in Cancian's study, for example, did not know what courses were offered at SAC or how to go about registering and paying for classes. Often, they were too intimidated to ask.

"Santa Ana Community College does a superb job of outreach [with high school students], but outside of the high schools you have to go into the college to get information," says Cancian. "This is intimidating to someone who does not have the experience of navigating the system. Many of the women who enrolled in the program would pass by the [SAC] gates and feel that they couldn't go in, even though most of the staff is Latino and bilingual."

Some 54 mothers participated in the Latina Mothers Project after Cancian and program specialist Karla Sanchez-Stagman handed out fliers at daycare centers, elementary schools, churches, and the Delhi Community Center, a nonprofit organization serving Santa Ana's low-income community. They had no trouble recruiting women. "We just had to go out there and talk their language," says Cancian.

Because the Latina Mothers Project was designed as a research study, not all of the participants received the same amount of support. Women in one group received extensive support from the program specialist, attended regular peer support group meetings, received \$500 in assistance for books, and were recognized for their accomplishments. Members of a second group received some support from the program specialist and \$300 in book assistance.

Women in a control group received only an initial introduction to the college. Each participant understood that she was part of a research project that would help demonstrate that low-income Hispanic women can successfully complete college, says Cancian.

The support that members of the first group received was invaluable, says Sanchez-Stagman. “Many of the women were intimidated by the structure,” she says. “They didn’t have the confidence. Little by little you could see a difference. I have had people in the community tell me that they could tell a difference in these women [once they enrolled at the college].”

Understanding the Community

Cancian is a firm believer that researchers have to work in and with the community in order to understand it. “I was better able to conceptualize the project because I had experience with the community,” she says. “If you want to do outreach, you have to get out of your office.”

Cancian began her community work by volunteering with the COPC at SAC and at the Delhi Community Center, which is located in a densely populated, low-income area of the city. She ran meetings, wrote program reports, and set program goals at the community center. As one of the COPC’s researchers, she worked to help local residents increase their involvement in the community. The COPC project helped Cancian gain a better understanding of how to communicate with and organize residents. It also strengthened her ties with staff members at the COPC and the community center, as well as local service providers. All of these contacts came in handy when Cancian began developing the Latina Mothers Project.

Grant funding for the Latina Mother’s Project came to an end in May 2003, but Cancian and Sanchez-Stagman are looking for ways to keep the project’s mission alive. The two plan to publish the findings of their research. Moreover, they have helped SAC establish the Motivated Latina Mothers Club, which provides the kind of peer support that study participants found so helpful.

“For immigrants, this is an incredibly long struggle,” says Cancian. “Those who don’t have basic skills have to take 3 years of English as a second language and remedial classes before they can enter junior college classes. It is amazing, though, what is possible. Many of the women enrolled in our program had full time or close to full time jobs and also were responsible for caring for their children and extended family. With a little support, quite a few were able to juggle all of this.”



Karla Stagman with daughter Kate.

Despite the difficulties, many women in the program were surprised to find that they had a greater capacity to succeed in college than they first thought.

“In the end, I [heard] people say ‘If I would have known it was this easy, I would have done this sooner,’” says Sanchez-Stagman. “The women are now becoming advocates and role models in their community for going to college.”

For more information, contact Dr. Francesca Cancian, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697, phone (949) 824–5403, e-mail fmcancia@uci.edu; or Karla Sanchez-Stagman, 3361 Alabama Circle, Costa Mesa, CA 92626, phone (714) 556–3775, e-mail karla_sanchez_stagman@hotmail.com. ■

Claremont Graduate University

California Resident Connects Neighbors to Community Resources



Denise Palmer

Low-income families in Ontario, California, have found a friend in Denise Palmer. The energetic mother of five is helping families in her southern California city find the services they need to stay afloat financially and improve their lives. Palmer even provides some of those services herself through a variety of initiatives.

Palmer and her husband own and produce *A Christian Place* magazine, which publishes uplifting stories about people who have persevered despite difficult times. Palmer serves as a resource staff person for the local Pomona Valley Inland Council of Churches, where she provides service referrals and advice to families in need. She also offers practical tips and training to families through her job as financial literacy coordinator for the Ontario Community-University Partnership Center (OCUP) at Claremont Graduate University and Pitzer College in Claremont, California.

What ties all of these activities together and helps make Palmer more effective is OCUP, which addresses education, healthcare, and housing needs facing the Ontario community. The collaborative has put Palmer and the people she helps in touch with an ever-expanding network of community partners now working together to make sure local residents receive the services they need.

Partners like Denise Palmer are the ones responsible for the success of OCUP's grassroots collaborative approach, says Marie Sandy, coprincipal investigator for OCUP and director of the Pitzer in Ontario Program, a community-based curriculum that integrates extensive internship experiences with interdisciplinary coursework. "Denise has been involved from the very beginning with the housing subcommittee," says Sandy. "She volunteered more than 100 hours of her time in the first 2 years of the partnership. She brings great ideas, enthusiasm, and passion to the issue."

Invited to an OCUP meeting by a friend, Palmer says she stayed involved in the collaborative because its partners are trying to meet community needs by matching those needs with community resources. Before OCUP's collaborative began, the community's existing resources were not fully used, she says, because residents and service providers lacked knowledge about what was available locally. "I really like to network and get people connected," says Palmer. "The collaborative has allowed each of the participants to learn more about each partner's [programs and resources]."

Making Connections, Empowering Families

Getting people connected and helping families is at the heart of almost everything Palmer does. She is currently working on a community resource directory, printed in English and Spanish, which will help local residents find information about the services OCUP partners provide.

“This directory provides residents one place to look for information,” says Palmer. “Even though a lot of the partners are listed in the phone book, individuals may not be sure what agency to talk to or what services are available. We are creating something families can use.”

As OCUP’s financial literacy coordinator, Palmer is also helping families learn the skills they need to stabilize their economic situation and move toward homeownership and self-sufficiency. She recruits participants for the literacy program and schedules workshops for first-time homebuyers that are conducted by Neighborhood Partnership Housing Services, an OCUP partner. Palmer is careful to schedule these classes in convenient locations to ensure good attendance. “We have learned through trial and error to hold classes in areas where people frequent,” says Palmer. “People are more comfortable in areas that they are familiar with.”

Palmer also teaches budgeting classes that show families how to use sales to live within their budgets, make better decisions about meal planning, and stretch their dollars. “This empowers families to do more,” says Palmer. “Large families are harder to manage. I really can relate to their needs. How do you feed and clothe a large family? I have compassion for the challenges they face.”

Palmer also tries to empower families through her magazine, which features information on free and low-cost entertainment such as church festivals and other community programs. For Palmer this is an important resource because “low-income families still want to go out and do things. They need positive outlets where they can spend time together.”

Building Trust

Despite all the resources available through OCUP partners, Palmer says that local families do not always trust those who want to help them.

“A lot of families seek help from an organization that they trust or are familiar with,” says Palmer. “When you ask them to attend [financial literacy classes], they want to know ‘What are you trying to sell me?’ To get them to attend, you have to build trust and respect into the equation.”

That’s where OCUP and its partners come in, says Palmer. The collaborative’s success and its hope for the future rests on the fact that “it is no longer just a collaborative of businesses and organizations,” she says. “It is a collaborative of friends who are doing more with our hearts.”

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Robert Morris University

Undergraduate's Compassion and Determination Give Hope to Middle School Students

Holly McGraw does not remember liking her classes very much when she attended South Allegheny High School outside Pittsburgh in the late 1990s. But, surprisingly enough, the 2003 graduate of Robert Morris University (RMU) in Moon Township, Pennsylvania, has always wanted to be a teacher.

In high school McGraw enjoyed helping fellow students with homework more than she liked doing her own. When she managed a local retail store after high school, her favorite duty was training new hires. During her college years she even managed to have fun while supervising large groups of energetic children at the McKeesport YMCA.

"Sometimes people get into education and then they actually work with kids and realize, 'Wow, this isn't what I want,'" says McGraw, "but after working at the YMCA, I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I love this.'"

McGraw was in her third year of college, preparing for a career as a business teacher, when she heard about an internship program for RMU students at Duquesne Middle School (about 20 minutes from her home). Eager for some practical classroom experience, she jumped at the chance to get involved and says she was not disappointed. Neither was RMU's COPC, which sponsored the internship. During her 6 short months at Duquesne Middle School, McGraw managed to establish afterschool and summer recreation programs for youngsters, spearheaded the school's first talent

show, and started a Student Leader of the Week Award program that turned class bullies into model students. She also forged some of the most meaningful relationships of her life.

COPC Connection

Hit hard by declines in western Pennsylvania's steel industry, Duquesne has seen better days. Once a prosperous steel town, it now struggles with high unemployment, an eroding tax base, and a lackluster business district. Fewer than half of the city's adults completed high school and almost half are unemployed. Most public school students (91.6 percent) come from low-income families and a third of those students admit to using drugs or alcohol.

The COPC at RMU is affiliated with America's Promise, a national nonprofit organization that supports young people in distressed communities. In addition to placing interns in Duquesne's middle and high schools, the COPC has helped the city develop a resource directory for its residents, is

working to build the capacity of a local youth athletic league, and is using workforce development programs to ease the local unemployment crisis.

Eleven other interns, called University Promise Fellows, accompanied McGraw to Duquesne Middle School in early 2003. Despite her initial excitement about working at the school, McGraw says she became restless after 2 weeks.



Holly McGraw with one of her students.



Students assist in playground renovation.

"I was just acting like a teacher's assistant," says McGraw. "I felt like I didn't have a mission. If the teacher wanted me to grade papers, I would grade papers. If a student had a question, I would help them. I was sort of like a tutor/teaching assistant. I thought, 'There has to be more to this. I don't feel like I'm making enough of an impact here.'"

McGraw soon got her chance to make a difference. When she found out that Duquesne had no afterschool activities, she got permission from the principal to establish a newspaper club and an activities team. The newspaper club published its first issue before McGraw's internship ended in May. The activities team presented the school's first talent show a few weeks later.

Warned by some teachers that neither students nor their parents would support the talent show, McGraw went to great lengths to make it a success. First, she recruited a popular disk jockey from a Pittsburgh radio station to serve as host. Embarking on a door-to-door campaign, McGraw then cajoled local business owners into donating 25 door prizes for the event. Finally, she worked with her students to plan the show, made fliers and banners to publicize it, choreographed several of

the dance numbers, stayed up all night creating music CDs for individual acts, and supervised afterschool rehearsals 2 or 3 days a week.

"We ended up having so much fun," says McGraw. "We had 253 people come to see it and I think there were 12 different acts. You would have thought I was a mom, I was bawling my eyes out during every performance."

McGraw's emotional response to the talent show illustrates one of the personal traits that made her such a successful intern, says Dan Horgan, executive director of America's Promise for Allegheny County, which collaborates with RMU on the COPC grant. "She has genuine compassion," says Horgan. "I think that is what these kids are hungry for. They don't get the attention that they need in the schools, and they don't get the attention they need at home. So when they get it from Holly, it really makes an impact."

McGraw is no pushover, maintains Horgan. She demanded respect from her students and let them know when they let her down. She did not hesitate to walk a student home from school so she could discuss a disciplinary problem with his or her parents. And she did all of this while still maintaining positive relations with her students. She also was persistent when trying to get Horgan and administrators at Duquesne Middle School to listen to her ideas.

"Holly is aggressive in a positive way," says Horgan. "She was one of those students who would come into my office every other day. She would just sit down on the floor and say, 'OK, so here's the deal.' She would tell me something she was frustrated about, and we would brainstorm and figure out what we were going to do about it. At Duquesne, she did the same thing. She would sit for hours after school until the principal came in for 2 minutes and answered her question. She wouldn't leave until she got the answer. And that is what we needed."

A Variety of Projects

Persistence and the ability to wrestle enthusiastically with even the most challenging problems characterized McGraw's many projects at Duquesne. For example, when she became concerned that disruptive behavior in her sixth-grade classroom was keeping good students from learning, McGraw instituted a Student Leader of the Week program and enlisted her fellow interns to keep track of students' positive behavior.

"If a student was on time for class, he or she got a check mark," says McGraw about the grading system she invented. "If you stayed in your seat the whole class period and didn't talk out, you got a check mark. If you participated in class, you got check marks. If you turned in your homework, if you showed that you had studied for a test, you got check marks."

At the end of each week, the two girls and two boys with the most check marks were honored during a special leadership recognition assembly. Each winner received a framed certificate and a prize: a basketball for boys and a jump rope for girls. The program was a huge success and the atmosphere in the classroom improved dramatically. Even one of the school's most notorious bullies began vying for the Student Leader of the Week title. He eventually did win the contest, says McGraw.

"I didn't think that it would have such an impact," she says about the contest. "I thought it would help the kids [who] really wanted to learn, but it ended up helping the kids that you thought didn't even want to be in school."

When her internship ended, McGraw missed her students so much that she convinced Horgan

to let her establish a summer camp in Duquesne. She designed a seven-component program that included crafts and games, literacy activities, a weekly field trip, and a service learning initiative. Free of charge, the camp attracted about 30 campers a week and lasted 9 weeks.

McGraw says the service learning activities had the biggest impact on the campers. They worked with younger children at the local Boys and Girls Club, helped repair the home of an elderly couple, and entertained older residents at a local retirement home. Their biggest undertaking was Operation Duquesne Beautification, a multipart activity during which campers cleaned up the city's three playgrounds, painted the playground equipment, and planted flowers and shrubs. McGraw asked florists in the neighborhood to donate the plants, and she convinced the city's business manager to provide the painting supplies.

Challenges

Despite her numerous successes, McGraw says she was not always so sure she would fit in at Duquesne Middle School. "The students were kind of mean in the beginning because they thought we were there to hurt them," she says. "They had



Students compete in a milk chugging contest

“JUST BEING THERE TO LISTEN TO THEIR STORIES MAKES SUCH HIGH-FIVE WHEN THEY DO SOMETHING GOOD. LITTLE THINGS

never seen a student teacher at this school. They thought we were there observing their behavior so the state could close the school.”

It took a while to gain the trust of students, but McGraw reports that they are now less suspicious of new people. They also take more pride in their community and themselves. At the beginning of the semester, the students did well in school because the interns wanted them to do well, but now, she says, “they do it just for themselves.”

While McGraw was able to build a good rapport with most of her students, she struggled throughout the semester with her inability to help those students deal with the violence that characterizes their daily lives.

“Whenever the kids would start acting out, I would talk to them and ask them what was going on,” says McGraw. “They would tell me that they were having a bad day. In the beginning I remember telling this one kid that I was having a really bad day, too. I had walked out to my car that morning, slipped on the ice, dropped my lunch, and ripped my pantyhose, and had to go back inside and change. Then he told me about his bad day. His uncle was babysitting him the night before when a poker game at the house got violent. I felt like such a jerk because my bad day was dropping my lunch and slipping on ice.”

After that incident, McGraw says she worked hard to find ways to make things better for her troubled students, but she found it hard to help them work through their pain, especially because their stories upset her so much. McGraw says she eventually decided that it was not her job to make the violence go away.

“By the end of the semester, I felt like I was making an impact on the kids’ lives just by showing up every day, because people in their lives don’t show up everyday,” she says. “Even just being there to listen to their stories makes such a difference. So



The dome at Robert Morris University.

does smiling at them or giving them a high-five when they do something good. Little things like that mean so much to them.”

For more information, contact Holly McGraw, Robert Morris University, 6001 University Boulevard, Moon Township, PA 15108, phone (412) 269-3674, e-mail MsHolly037@aol.com. ■

A DIFFERENCE. SO DOES SMILING AT THEM OR GIVING THEM A LIKE THAT MEAN SO MUCH TO THEM.”

Part II: Empowering Local Organizations

Virginia Commonwealth University

Faculty Member Makes Long-Term Commitment to Neighborhood Revitalization



Dr. Gulak

Students enrolled in Dr. Morton Gulak's planning courses at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, typically do not spend more than a semester helping local residents create a vision for their neighborhoods. When Gulak agreed to help the city's Carver Neighborhood develop a master plan in 2000, however, the planning work expanded considerably beyond the one-semester timeframe. Gulak's commitment, and the university's, turned out to be long-term.

Despite Gulak's 25 years of experience conducting applied community development research, the welcome he received when he first became involved in the Carver community was not particularly warm. At the time, Gulak was serving on a VCU committee that was exploring the possibility of expanding the university's campus into the Carver neighborhood. The small, predominantly African American community of 1,000 people did not like the idea. Members of the Carver Area Civic Improvement League (CACIL) made it clear that they did not want VCU moving in and taking over the area. They were particularly concerned that the university would build student housing in the neighborhood, further degrading a community that wanted to foster owner-occupied, not rental, housing.

What could have grown into a fiery town-gown dispute was defused when the university agreed not to expand beyond a certain street in the neighborhood. VCU's committee, which later became the Carver-VCU Partnership steering committee, then turned its attention to finding ways that the university could help the neighborhood meet the challenges it was facing. An early partnership project involved Gulak's students, who analyzed neighborhood conditions and found that Carver's housing stock was deteriorating and that vacant lots, dating back to the days of urban renewal, dotted the streetscape. There was a real need for housing renovation as well as for new housing, says Gulak. One particular finding went to the heart of the neighborhood's needs. "I realized that the city wasn't paying much attention to the neighborhood," says Gulak. "The neighborhood needed a master plan so the city could direct its resources [there]."

For 3 months in summer 2000, CACIL members and other residents met each week to create that master plan. Gulak and his graduate students facilitated the process, which allowed residents to identify their concerns about the neighborhood and brainstorm about ways to improve it. After each meeting,

Gulak and his students developed draft plans based on the group's discussion. The planning group then had the opportunity to change and refine the plans during a process that took longer than some residents expected. "When we started some people understood how long it takes to develop and implement a plan, but the neighborhood expected things to be done immediately," says Gulak. "Over time people have a better perspective of how long it takes to make things happen."

In addition to teaching them patience, the planning process also equipped residents with the skills and vision to advocate for their neighborhood, says Gulak. That advocacy seems to be bearing fruit. The Carver Neighborhood Plan has been incorporated into the city of Richmond's master plan, and the city has designated Carver as one of six "neighborhoods in bloom," so it can receive Community Development Block Grant funds for neighborhood revitalization activities. In addition, the Richmond Housing Authority and local nonprofits have increased their investment in the neighborhood's affordable housing market. "Most people in urban neighborhoods don't know where to go or what questions to ask to make things happen in their neighborhood," says Gulak. "Residents [in Carver] are using this plan to push the city to pay attention to them. This process got residents to know their neighborhood better [and] know the city officials. [It] empowered residents. They could now answer city questions about what the neighborhood wanted and how to develop the area."

Carver residents credit Gulak with making this possible. CACIL President Barbara Abernathy describes Gulak as a consensus builder who helped residents visualize their community's future and create an inviting neighborhood where people would want to live.

"He brought to bear . . . things that we didn't know about or had not entertained in our mind," says Abernathy. "We wanted to promote homeownership and limit rental housing. The planning [process] let us know what the ramifications [were] for our neighborhood." Residents were particularly concerned about the neighborhood's zoning, which allowed for the interspersing of multifamily, rental, and industrial uses with single-family housing. The neighborhood's master plan addresses this concern by calling for a rezoning of the neighborhood so that development can proceed based on residents' priorities.

Like any partnership, Gulak and CACIL have faced challenges, including the difficult task of building trust between the partners. Gulak says he's seen attitude changes both in the community and on campus. "There are still some who are suspicious, but as we have worked together, the roles have become more personal," says Gulak. "The students, faculty, and administration have started looking at Carver differently. It is more than a neighborhood that was right next to the university. The neighborhood is a partner."

Gulak says the planning process also changed him, helping him to grow professionally and personally. "I have gained a better understanding of the neighborhood development process," he says. "Before, students would work for a semester on developing a master plan for a community and then leave. This [process] has made me more aware that there are things that need to be done to implement that plan." Gulak is now taking part in some of that implementation work by serving as an advisor to the CACIL housing committee.

Finally, Gulak says he and his students have also learned valuable lessons about how a university can best approach its community engagement activities.

"You need to approach it as a real partnership," he says. "The university can't assume that [it] can solve all the problems or even that [it] know[s] what the problems are. This process takes time. You have to be prepared to commit yourself for a long period of time."

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University of Delaware

Program Builds the Capacity of Delaware's Nonprofits



Paul Calistro

In a matter of 4 years, West End Neighborhood House in Wilmington, Delaware, has gone from a novice affordable housing developer to a leader in Delaware's affordable housing community. Paul Calistro, who serves as executive director of the nonprofit community organization, attributes at least part of West End's success to the technical assistance and training it received from the University of Delaware's (UD) Nonprofit Community Resource Center (NCRC).

"I didn't know anything about housing development before attending [NCRC's] Housing Capacity Building Certificate program and now I am considered an expert in Delaware," says Calistro, who has more than 20 years of experience developing nonprofit programs. As a result of the NCRC training, housing development is now one of the cornerstones in West End's effort to renew the communities it serves, says Calistro. Established in 1883 as a settlement house to help Wilmington's immigrant families, the organization also offers a variety of supports to low-income families, including healthcare, childcare, and economic development programs.



Timothy Barnekov

UD's Center for Community Research and Service (CCRS) established the Community Development Resource Center in 1995 to help nonprofits like West End better meet the needs of the communities they serve. (The center's name was later changed to the Nonprofit Community Resource Center.) Located in a downtown Wilmington building with 70 other area nonprofits, NCRC offers community groups easy access to professional assistance and an 8,000-piece nonprofit resource library. The center's certificate training programs provide nuts-and-bolts information about nonprofit management, community development, and housing development. Its Housing Capacity Building Certificate program, developed in partnership with the Delaware State Housing Authority and the Delaware Community Investment Corporation, provides capacity-building grants that nonprofits can use to increase their ability to deliver housing resources and services in the community.

"What we saw from working with nonprofits is that many of the organizations needed more technical assistance and capacity building," says Timothy Barnekov, dean of the College of Human Services, Education, and Public Policy at UD and former director of CCRS. "Our goal was to improve the capacity of nonprofits in our community."

That has certainly happened with West End. Before Calistro attended the Housing Capacity Building Certificate program, his organization focused primarily on services and was not involved in housing development at all. Now, it has rehabilitated 70 housing units in the Wilmington area. In addition, a grant

from the Housing Capacity Building Certificate program enabled West End to hire a consultant to document the need for affordable housing in the community and then determine how the organization could help address that need. The study, which included feedback from residents and housing experts, helped shape West End's housing development plan. Originally, the organization had planned to increase the number of affordable rental units in the community. West End changed those plans when study findings suggested that a program to create affordable homeownership opportunities would be more successful.

Housing Plans

Without a clear understanding of housing development, West End's plan to develop affordable housing could have remained just that: a plan. "Developing housing is very specific," says Calistro. "It has its own nomenclature, it requires layered financing, it is more than just raising money to rehab houses." During the training, Calistro and two of his staff learned how to deal with complex budgeting and predevelopment issues and how to create a sound financing structure. The classes also helped West End craft strategies to bolster the success of its housing program, including preselling homes and using housing development to spur other investment in the community.

"By selling most of the houses before rehabbing or building them, it improves our cash flow, enables us to secure financial support, and also creates a synergy and interest in the neighborhood," says Calistro. "Another one of our strategies is taking the worst house on the block and making it the best house. This really pulls up the value of all the houses on the street. Once people see this investment, they start making investments in their homes."

Calistro sees a direct correlation between the university's support and community revitalization. "Through the housing capacity program in the past 4 years, we have been able to leverage \$11 million worth of housing here," he says. "The results are very tangible. For every house we build, I estimate that the private market builds two."

Although Barnekov has not been involved in daily operation of NCRC since 2000, he remains proud of its accomplishments. "Much of the affordable housing built in the area has been assisted either directly or indirectly by [the Housing Capacity Building Certificate program]," he says. "We are creating a long-term impact on nonprofits. This is especially important now when nonprofits are under stress from lean years. By having these skills, the managers are better able to manage [their] stress and direct their resources to meet community needs."

For more information, contact Dr. Timothy Barnekov, dean of the College of Human Sciences, Education and Public Policy, University of Delaware, 184 Graham Hall, Newark, DE 19716, phone (302) 831-2396, e-mail barnekov@udel.edu; or Paul Calistro, executive director, West End Neighborhood House, 710 North Lincoln Street, Wilmington, DE 19805, phone (302) 658-4171, e-mail pcalistro@westendnh.org. ■

Mercer University

Former Public Housing Resident Becomes Neighborhood Advocate



Leila Goodlow

There's a sign in the front yard of Leila Goodlow's home in Macon, Georgia, that identifies her as a neighborhood advocate. When Goodlow's neighbors in the city's Central South neighborhood call her on the telephone to ask what the sign means, they get a simple answer. "I am a leader in the neighborhood," Goodlow tells her callers, and then proceeds to give them information about upcoming community events and available resources.

Goodlow got her sign and her sense of purpose from the Neighborhood Advocates Fellowship Program (NAFP), a leadership development program established by the Center for Community Development at Mercer University. The program equips residents like Goodlow with the leadership skills they need to increase the number of homeowners in their neighborhoods, provide assistance to residents, raise awareness of community initiatives, and act as community advocates. Goodlow is one of the first eight members of NAFP's resident leadership corps, which operates with funds from Mercer's COPC grant. The fellows receive special training, complete an individual community project, and then make themselves available to help their neighbors and their neighborhoods.

"The fellows are chosen because they are already doing some sort of community service," says Program Manager Maria Arvelo. "Ms. Goodlow is very active in her church. She is the poster child for what we want residents to rise to. She is employed, owns her own home, and is active and enthusiastic about immersing herself in the community and helping others."

Being engaged in her community is something that comes naturally to Goodlow, who says she cannot remember a time when she was not involved in local affairs. "I often help my neighbors," she says. "I transport neighbors to the doctor and shopping. I have a real love of helping others."

In addition to her outgoing nature, Goodlow also is a good role model for fellow residents. After living in the former Oglethrope Homes public housing community for 17 years, Goodlow recently purchased her first home in Beall's Hill, a new, mixed-income development financed with a \$19 million HOPE VI grant from HUD.

"A lot of people have low self-esteem, but they still want to become a homeowner or go back to school," she says. "My job is to be an example for them." Goodlow says that she tells first-time homebuyers: "If I can do it, you can do it too." Her approach seems to be working. Two of Goodlow's new neighbors decided to become homeowners after hearing her speak at a homebuyer workshop.

Goodlow's new homeowner status has also given her another characteristic that all neighborhood advocates need: she now has a vested interest in seeing that her new neighborhood is a success. "The prior neighborhood was all run down," says Goodlow. "Now with the new development, business will be coming back. It is all beauty right now."

While there is hope of better times ahead for the neighborhood, it was not always that way. Before the HOPE VI project and its related revitalization got underway, the Central South neighborhood displayed many of the characteristics of a community in despair. Buildings were run down, empty lots were littered with trash, and few residents owned homes. While the new Beall's Hill neighborhood is stimulating a broad revitalization effort in the area, COPC partners knew that local residents would have to take an active role if the revitalization effort was going to be long-lasting. The Center for Community Development created NAFP as a way to sustain the revitalization.

Training

To prepare NAFP fellows for their new leadership role, Mercer provides training in a variety of areas, including homeownership, community and economic development, conflict transformation, and organizational development. The training also gives fellows information about local programs and the skills they need to make presentations about those programs.

Of all the training she attended, Goodlow says that the conflict transformation training was one of the most difficult and one of the most beneficial. "One of the things we learned was how to tell others about programs [in the community]," she says. "You really have to be a good listener. You can tell people that the program is there for them, but they have to make up their own minds."

NAFP also provides a support system that Goodlow finds to be invaluable. "Without the program, I could not have done what I have," says Goodlow. "The program provides the encouraging word that I needed. The speakers kept telling us to keep striving."

A Changing Neighborhood

Goodlow says she's seen many changes in Central South since the revitalization effort began. "There is more pride in the neighborhood," she says. "You can hear it in the tone of the people who have moved in." She is full of ideas for ways she can contribute to building that feeling of pride. She has already formed a neighborhood watch program that gives residents the opportunity to work together to prevent neighborhood crime. Now she's busy planning her next projects. Goodlow would like to establish a lawn care business so young people in the neighborhood can learn responsibility and earn money. She also has been thinking of establishing a hospitality committee that will welcome newcomers to the neighborhood and attend to the needs of shut-in residents.

Whatever the individual project, Goodlow says she's determined to make a difference in her community. "I will not stop," she says. "My goal is to keep going."

For more information, contact Leila Goodlow, 827 Elizabeth Street, Macon, GA 31201, phone (478) 745-1149, e-mail ltg827@aol.com. ■

Wright State University

Chilean Native Helps Dayton Agencies Serve Hispanic Clients

Carolina Silva was “looking for something to do” in 2001 when she began volunteering at the East End Community Service Corporation (EECSC), a nonprofit agency in Dayton, Ohio, that sponsors education, recreation, health, and job-training programs for low-income residents. Silva had come to Dayton the previous fall from her native Chile to pursue a master’s degree in public administration at Wright State University (WSU) and to work with the university’s COPC through a graduate assistantship.

“EECSC needed someone who could speak Spanish,” says Silva about the weeks she spent volunteering at the neighborhood agency. “They had lots of services but they weren’t reaching the Hispanic community. I speak Spanish and, because I’m a foreign student, I was interested in seeing how community work is done here, so that is how it started. I had the interest, I had the background, there was a need, and I wanted to learn.”

Silva’s relationship with EECSC has grown by leaps and bounds since 2001. The corporation decided to sponsor Silva’s 3-year work visa after she received her master’s degree in 2002. Since then, Silva has been working as a full-time program evaluator, grants manager, and jobs coach at EECSC. She is still the only staff person who speaks Spanish, and Spanish-speaking clients often enlist her help when they need to access local services. She has also been instrumental in helping EECSC establish The Latino Connection, a network of community-based organizations that work together to serve the city’s growing Hispanic community.

The transition from volunteer to paid staff member began when Silva’s faculty advisor, Dr. Jack Dustin, found out about her volunteer work. Dustin, who managed the university’s COPC grant, conferred with Silva and EECSC Director Jan Lepore-Jentleson and then switched Silva’s assistantship assignment to EECSC, which was an active COPC partner. Before the switch, Silva had been working with WSU’s College of Business Administration to

establish Junior Achievement programs in local high schools.

“I was really supported by the university,” says Silva. “Jack Dustin told me that the idea behind the COPC was to make a difference and to try to make changes. So he let me switch [my assistantship], and I am really grateful for that. He could have said that this wasn’t in the original program. He could have said that, but he didn’t.”



Carolina Silva (standing).

Growing Hispanic Population

The neighborhood surrounding EECSC’s community center has been 90-percent Caucasian and 5-percent African American for as long as most residents can remember, says Lepore-Jentleson. Recently, however, an increasing number of Hispanic residents have moved into the area from Mexico and Latin America. Their presence in Dayton has posed enormous challenges for local service organizations that have never served a Spanish-speaking clientele. In addition to struggling with the language barrier, agencies have found that Hispanic residents are hard to reach. “They don’t come out much,” says Lepore-Jentleson.

Despite the challenges involved, Lepore-Jentleson says that EECSC and other Dayton agencies feel strongly that it is in the city's best interest to educate these new residents and find them jobs. "In Dayton, like so many other cities in this country, the population is just nosediving," she says. "We need a new population to rebuild our neighborhoods. We have got a wonderful opportunity here if we provide the right kinds of services and the right environment to prevent this population from becoming a permanent underclass. For this reason we were happy to connect with Carolina. We were just learning and Carolina brought focus to that learning and sped up the learning curve for all of us. We started to 'get it' because of her connection to us."

Silva had experience already in community work when she arrived in Dayton from Concepcion, the second largest city in Chile. After receiving her bachelor's degree from the University of Concepcion, she worked for 6 years as a psychologist on a mental health team at a public hospital. She also worked part-time for a domestic violence prevention and intervention program.

"My interest in coming to the United States was to learn how things work here and to see the differences between my country and this one," she says. "I learned that some things are better here, some things are better in my country, but it is all relative because the realities are very different. In Chile, we have to make programs work with a lot less money. Here it is so much easier to get things done. Being here has also made me aware of immigration issues and racial issues. Coming from another country that is so far away and so isolated, these are issues that I never faced before."

The Latino Connection

Immigration issues loom large for Silva's clients. Many are in the United States illegally and find themselves subject to abuses from landlords and employers because their precarious legal status prevents them from reporting those abuses to authorities. After meeting Dayton Police Officer John Pawelski, Silva learned that the fear of being sent back home also makes immigrants reluctant to call the police.

"The police department was being feared by the people instead of being called in case of emergency," recalls Silva. "John said, 'We are not immigration agents. We want everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, to contact us if they are in danger or are a victim of crime.'"

Certain that other service providers felt similar frustrations, Silva and Pawelski decided to call a meeting to see if local agencies would be interested in working together to serve Dayton's growing Hispanic population. Six or seven organizations were represented at the first meeting of The Latino Connection. After a great deal of networking, that number has grown to include more than 25 public agencies and private organizations working in city government, law, healthcare, banking, community development, and education.

The Latino Connection has been so successful that other cities are now showing an interest in adopting its networking approach. "Service organizations in the community want to reach out to this population," says Silva, who now serves as vice president of The Latino Connection and belongs to the police department's policy review committee. "Before the creation of The Latino Connection, each organization was working alone. Now, we are working together."

Although issues facing the Hispanic community can be complex, members of The Latino Connection realized early that simple solutions often are the



Mexican folk dancers.

“THE KEY WAS THAT THESE PROGRAMS AND IDEAS CAME FROM OF YOURSELF AS THE IMPORTANT EXPERT WHO COMES AND TELLS

most effective. For example, being able to identify Spanish speakers at various city agencies has improved local service delivery tremendously. Silva says she now knows the names and telephone numbers of police officers who can speak Spanish to clients that need assistance. Silva can also refer victims of domestic violence to agencies where a caseworker can talk to them in their own language. “If The [Latino] Connection didn’t exist, I would have to spend a lot more time trying to find out what was available in the community for my clients,” she says.

The Latino Connection has also been successful in changing the policies of some service organizations so more Hispanic residents can be served. For example, when residents reported that they were



Students on campus at Wright State University.

not being treated at a local health clinic because they did not have a Social Security Number, The Latino Connection members stepped in. The clinic soon prohibited its receptionists from turning away any patient, even if he or she could not complete every line of the intake form. When clients were refused electric service because they could not produce the required driver’s license, The Latino Connection intervened again. As a result, Dayton Power and Light now accepts a passport or a driver’s license from another country as proof of

identification.

To facilitate this change, The Latino Connection distributed a small card, featuring English translations for common Spanish words, so that receptionists could read foreign identification cards.

“These things weren’t happening because the agencies wanted to discriminate,” says Silva about the old policies. “Our clients were running into trouble because the front-line people didn’t know how to handle their special situations or couldn’t understand a foreign document.”

Silva downplays her role in The Latino Connection; she says her job was to “call people and be persistent.” But others say The Latino Connection would not have happened without her.

“Carolina has got a sharply critical analytical ability,” says Lepore-Jentleson. “She approached The Latino Connection very systematically. She recognized that you need to get the right people to the table. Her skill level added a level of sophistication to something that otherwise might have eventually faded away.”

Lessons Learned

Silva has enjoyed many successes since she first came to EECSC, but she has learned some hard lessons as well. One of the most painful, and important, lessons came while she was working on an early project to publicize the services offered by organizations involved in The Latino Connection. Silva suggested that The Latino Connection organize information meetings at EECSC and invite local residents to attend.

“Everyone said, ‘Yeah, that’s brilliant,’” says Silva. “I made fliers and I went to the neighborhood and passed them out. I was all ready for the first meeting and one person showed up. I didn’t give up. I said, ‘I have to be persistent.’ For the second meeting, I even went to church on Sunday to pass out the fliers outside the church. Nobody showed

THE PEOPLE . . . THAT’S WHEN THEY WORK, NOT WHEN YOU THINK THEM WHAT THEY NEED.”

up at that meeting. That made me come to my senses. I realized that you really have to be respectful of how residents feel. Who am I for them to trust me? They don’t know me. They are afraid of the system. Who am I to tell them what they should know? So I just started working with clients on a one-to-one basis, trying to connect them with the services they needed. And the word started to get out.”

As a result of her new approach, several successful programs were started at EECSC. One of Silva’s clients volunteered to establish a Mexican folk dance group that practiced and performed at the center. Another client started an Alcoholics Anonymous group for Spanish speakers. “The key was that these programs and ideas came from the people,” says Silva. “That’s when they work, not when you think of yourself as the important expert who comes and tells them what they need.”

After her work visa expires in 3 years, Silva says she has many options, thanks to the experiences she’s had since coming to Wright State. She may stay at EECSC. She might want to try her hand at influencing policy regarding immigrants at the state or federal level. Or, she says, she may go back home to Chile. “They are going through a public reform, so my work might be very valuable there now,” says Silva. “I am open to many things.”

In the meantime, Silva is content to continue doing her best to make a difference in the lives of her EECSC clients.

“I feel useful,” she says. “I feel that I’m doing something that is making a difference. I have my background, I have my experience. I’m learning something, and I feel that I’m paying back for what the university did for me.”

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Students relax on WSU campus.

