St. John’s Professor Utilizes Academic Service–Learning and Creative Art Aesthetics to Discover New York

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Heidi Upton, D.M.A., an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Core Studies at St. John’s University, interprets teaching as a secondary art form. A classically trained pianist as well as a teaching artist, she uses her training in the arts when she teaches Discover New York (DNY), a mandatory course that provides first-year students with a remarkable experience. Whether incorporating photojournalism, poetry or story-telling, the course weaves together elements of academic service-learning, critical thinking, creativity and student reflection.

After witnessing the enormous number of homeless persons in New York City, Dr. Upton unveiled a new technique in her DNY curriculum. With the assistance of Learning Communities and the Office of Academic Service-Learning (AS-L), a pedagogical concept that blends classroom theory with a required service activity, the DNY/homeless project—DNYhome—engages students in direct service to New York City’s homeless community.

“In the past I attended meetings on AS-L but did not see how I could incorporate it into my curriculum as it existed then but I knew it was important for the DNY program,” Dr. Upton explains. “Once I re-worked my course, I wanted service-learning to be intimately woven with what we did in the classroom.”

Dr. Upton partners with several service entities that work with New York City’s homeless population to facilitate this program. Her DNY students dedicate nine hours over the course of the semester working with some of the neediest members of society. Students are required to capture the essence of their experiences through creative responses such as photo essays, poetry, creative writing projects, and research papers.

When asked the biggest challenge in creating this program, Dr. Upton replies: “Finding the service sites that were appropriate for the course. In this regard, I had the complete cooperation of the AS-L staff. I am grateful that the AS-L structure exists. Because of the work Melanie Serge-Roth and the other administrators, I know I’m not alone but have an amazing support system from the department.

In DNYhome, students are encouraged to step outside their comfort zone and become social justice pioneers. By doing so, they become critical thinkers in addressing the deeply-rooted, complicated issues of homelessness in America.

“I think the University wants to develop citizens of the world and I want our students to understand they have an obligation to be wide awake—to respond to that world in authentic ways,” Dr. Upton explains. “AS-L asks that we live integrated lives. It feels good when you activate your whole self—using both your creative and your thinking mind, you suddenly feel alive and happy.”
A Life-Altering Experience
“The first time I participated in service-learning, I was surprised to see the amount of homeless people lined up in single file to receive a hot meal,” says Louis Romero, a freshman DNY student. “It was truly heart-wrenching and it simply didn’t make sense to me. After my last service opportunity, I made a promise to myself that I would continue with my volunteer service and not just limit it to part of a school requirement.”
Freshman Zina Barrow reports that she noticed “the people standing in line were not the stereotypical poor person—the adults looked like they could be your next door neighbor and the children looked like classmates sitting alongside your little brother or sister at daycare. Prior to the homeless initiative developed by Dr. Upton, I would only notice people asking for food or money but now I notice everyone—the vocal and the silent; those walking and those sleeping on park benches—this service experience has forever changed my life.”

VISA
Academic Service-Learning enhances the educational experience of St. John’s students and is a major component of the University’s 2009-2013 Strategic Plan. It’s also a part of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action (VISA), which was launched by the University to more visibly embed St. John’s Catholic and Vincentian mission into the educational experience of its students. VISA provides an organizational focus for a variety of new and ongoing programs through which faculty and students can work together to explore the causes of and develop solutions for poverty and social injustice throughout the world.