

## SENIOR CENTER IN SEATTLE APPLAUDS SERVICE-LEARNING

BY NOLA L. FREEMAN

IN THE FALL OF 1992, the Pike Market Senior Center, an urban gathering place for a widely diverse community of low income elders, joined 30 other sites in the Seattle area in accepting an invitation from the Carlson Leadership and Public Service Office at the University of Washington. In accepting this invitation, these sites agreed to help the office accomplish the following mission: "To promote, support, and organize opportunities for undergraduates to become involved in effective public service, helping them to mature in their understanding of complex social, philosophical, economic, and political issues, and instilling in them a life-long commitment to community service and involvement."

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**AGES IS ONE WAY TO BREAK DOWN EXISTING MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES.**

As liaison between Pike Market Senior Center and the Carlson Office, I will be discussing the learning curve we have traveled in this happy collaboration. I will also discuss the partnership aspect of collaboration, the intergenerational relationship between student and elder, the reflecting back to the agency that comes from student involvement, and the overall benefits to our senior center derived from participating in the service-learning program.

The early collaboration between the Carlson Office and Pike Market Senior Center translated simply into an opportunity to gain energetic volunteers. Even this, given the philosophy of working with volunteers that informs my approach, would have been a benefit to both the student and the agency.

But as each teaching quarter passed, the agency became more aware of the collaborative aspect of service-learning. The view of the student as "volunteer" became balanced with awareness that this small community of elders and staff had a role to play in providing information about social issues. We saw that we provided a fertile field in which to grow and test ideas. The continued growth in awareness of our staff responsibility brought the realization that the elders were playing a vital role in the student understanding the theories and assumptions of text and lecture. The view of the agency as an

extension of the classroom began to take hold.

Our grown up understanding of service-learning was rewarded by an invitation, in fall of 1994, to participate during winter quarter 1995 in an oral history project—a partnership effort between two geography faculty, four students, four elders, the staff of the Carlson Office and myself.

The students, from the geography classes "World Hunger and Resource Development" taught by Dr. Lucy Jarosz and "Latin America: Landscape of Change" taught by Dr. Vicky Lawson, were paired with senior center elders for the purpose of listening to and recording scenes from their lives. The elders were, when possible, of Hispanic American heritage. The

stories gathered by the students were examined against the background of the theories of text and lecture. At the completion of the course, the students used stories gathered in the final research paper and panel discussion. The elders received a written copy of the sto-

ries or a cassette copy of the interview.

The partnership aspect was felt every step of the way. Before the winter quarter began Kim Johnson-Bogart, Director of the Carlson Office, Shelly Field, Service-Learning Program Coordinator, Dr. Jarosz, Dr. Lawson, and I met to outline the interview steps, discuss the selection of elders, and determine how the students would meet and work with them. After the project was completed, we met again for critique. During the quarter, the students and I participated in an ongoing dialogue. There was also a lot of checking in, student with faculty, faculty with the Carlson Office, elder with student, student with elder, and me with all of the above. This was definitely a participatory project.

During the course of the academic quarter, very creative dialogue took place between the students and elders. One team pored over a textbook and map of Mexico brought to the Center by the student. The elder was able to see and comment on what the student was learning at the University as well as show the student his homeland. This made the project very real to the elder and very relevant to the student.

With another team, Mr. Lawrence Begay, although deeply rooted in his Navajo culture, went weekly to the library to do research, wanting to offer a solidly factual contribution to the

dialogue with the student. Mr. Begay says about his participation in the project, "I appreciated the social interaction. I was glad to help (the student) with his goal. He was a friendly person—very sincere. He even went to a Pow-Wow with me. This type of education is important. Even at my age I'm still learning a lot about society at large. Learning more makes me feel more comfortable. This project diverted my attention from the streets."

This oral history project was outstandingly intergenerational. The bringing of youth and aged together is a vital aspect of working with older adults. Bridging the generations through activities that are important to all ages is one way to break down existing myths and stereotypes. The generations have to talk to one another, but they must also work and play together. The older adult wants to think in terms of legacy, progeny of ideas and culture. Survivorship—"the quality, condition, or state of being" a survivor—should be celebrated.

**THE MORE WE INVOLVE MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY-AT-LARGE WITH OUR WORK, THE BETTER OFF WE ARE. THE OBSERVATIONS, QUESTIONS, AND COMMENTS FROM THE STUDENTS CAN REVEAL HOW WE ARE SEEN BY THEM.**

Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers says, "The best part of survivorship is that we can afford to look beyond ourselves to those who will come after."

At the Pike Market Senior Center we are committed to giving the elders a voice to speak to those who will come after. Our collaboration with the Carlson Office service-learning students has broadened the opportunities for our elders to speak out. It gladdens the heart to see youth and age in partnership—both at work and at play.

The final aspect of collaboration in service-learning is the reflecting back that happens when the students come into our community. Any organization that delivers a service or product needs a means of assuring the high quality with which that service is delivered. In human services we often feel very good about what we do. We receive praise and attention from the community for doing work that is often difficult. I feel that there is a danger of becoming too self-satisfied or accepting of the status quo. The more we involve members of the community-at-large with our work, the better off we are. The observations, questions, and comments from the students can reveal how we are seen by them. The idealism of youth can be inspiring to staff who are in the trenches, and the feedback

from students is enlightening. Sometimes we make corrections in the way we deliver our services based on the reflecting back from the folks who involve themselves in our work.

I recall two remarkable examples of students actively influencing our life here. A Chinese-American woman led a discussion among members on the subject of racism. She drew from them suggestions on how she should handle racist remarks made to her by acquaintances. The members who took part in this open forum had never been challenged on that level before. They gradually came to face their own prejudices. Konrad Ribeiro, our first service-learning student, participated in staff policy discussions on the subject how racism affects members and staff within the center. The student was able, through ideas he had developed as a direct result of his formal education at the University of Washington, to help us gain a better understanding of the impact of racism.

I wish to make clear my enthusiasm for the advent of service-learning. The benefits seem so obvious and tangible that I wonder why the idea took so long to catch on. Through service-learning, the lessons of education are tested and applied. We are educated, I hope, for entry into the real world. One benefit that may be less measurable than ideas that can be inserted into research papers and panel discussions, is the lesson of ethics. Rules of interaction in society are hard to teach in text or lecture. I believe we learn our ethics experientially.

In concluding, I want to share with you a paper written by Konrad Ribeiro in fall of 1992. At that time, he was a student in the class, "World Hunger and Resource Development." Konrad says to us:

...I am also indebted to Professor Lucy Jarosz for her commitment to allowing us the opportunity to supplement our book learning with real learning. I gleaned much from the geography class, as I always do, but the reason I am learning becomes obscured, as we are fed a daily dose of gloom and doom. The human element of geography, the component which drew me to the department, is easy to lose track of as we deal in numbers on the macro scale. I often fear my goal of impacting people on an individual basis will be sidetracked as I get caught up in the statistics.

I will admit that I was hesitant in committing myself to

the volunteer option for a number of reasons. Firstly, a 12-page research paper is 'safe'. I knew what I would have to do and I could just do it. Also, I did not want to get squeezed for time and end up flaking



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on the organization I'd committed to. The foremost reason I hesitated before signing up for the volunteer service, though, was fear. We become very comfortable in our University environment. We talk about the problems of the world, the nation and our region but we never really have to muddy our hands with reality. The opportunity provided by Professor Jarosz, the Pike Market Senior Center and the Carlson office gave me a chance to change the status quo, and frankly, that was scary. I'm not sure what tipped the scales in favor of deciding to accept the challenge.

Perhaps I disliked the idea of another paper describing vague issues of land tenure in some third world country. Perhaps I knew I'd have plenty of room on my schedule to volunteer twice a week. Perhaps a combination of both reasons; I doubt it.

Only when I confronted my fear of meeting the people I one day want to be working for and with did I agree to make a commitment to Pike Market and to myself. I'm glad I did....

Konrad completed his obligatory one quarter of service at Pike Market and then stayed on for another year, faithfully visiting the Center once a week.

The Carlson Office service-learning students have brought a vigor to the Pike Market Senior Center. When the new quarter begins and a student is introduced to the membership they are greeted with smiles and applause. The members now ask what their goals are, what class they are taking and just what they hope to accomplish at the center.

At the Pike Market Senior Center, we are grateful to be among the 80 sites that students can now choose from when selecting the service-learning track. We will follow with great interest the direction this innovation takes, hoping to move and change with it. ♦

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