

Learning in community

Glenn Oviatt | Mar. 6, 2010



Brooke Currier, a member of the Dorothy Day community at Marquette University in Milwaukee, helps students pronounce the name of a classmate during a class at the International Learning Center. (Photos by Glenn Oviatt)

MILWAUKEE -- When Leah Todd steps off the elevator in her dorm after a long night of studying at the library, she has only one thing on her mind: sleep.

But before she can drag her feet to her room, Todd sees several of her neighbors sitting in the lounge talking about their day. She breathes a sigh of relief.

She is home at last.

A journalism and philosophy double major, Todd is one of 44 Marquette University sophomores participating in the inaugural Dorothy Day Social Justice Living/Learning Community.

Community members not only live together, but also engage social justice issues through participation in the Jesuit university's Service Learning Program at Milwaukee shelters and nonprofits. Students volunteer at one service site for the entire school year and attend one community-specific class together per semester, focusing on philosophy of human nature and Christian discipleship.

In the spirit of Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement in the 1930s, students are encouraged to develop a deeper understanding of social justice issues in the Milwaukee community and in the world at large.

Jonathan Ebben, resident assistant on the men's floor, said one of the program's central goals is to introduce a sense that service is a part of life.

"It's been good to see how people have incorporated service into their lives, taken the lessons from their experiences and have shared them with the floor," Ebben said. "Some discussions have been eye-opening and very provocative."

For Todd, the growth of the community has been a "beautiful process" of spending time together, working through conflicts and taking risks to enter new and challenging conversations.

By going through their day-to-day college activities together, Todd said, the community has formed a strong foundation for experiencing and understanding social injustices in Milwaukee. "It's a huge tribute to the power of community living," she said.

Human connectedness

Brooke Currier, a member of the Dorothy Day community, stands before 10 students twice her age in a small classroom at the International Learning Center.

On the dry-erase board, she writes the name of a student.

"Asha," she says, turning to a Somali woman wearing a traditional green dress. "You're next."

Asha smiles widely and puts a pencil to her paper while Currier spells Asha's name aloud for the class.

Currier enunciates slowly, letting each sound linger on her tongue.

"Now, take your pencil and write 'Asha.' A-S-H-A."

Currier waits as the students, who are immigrants and refugees from various African and Asian countries, scrawl the name of their classmate and sound out the letters as they write.

Most of the students in this class have little to no knowledge of the English language and are almost entirely illiterate.

"Now, Asha," Currier says, "what is your favorite color?"

Asha searches through a box of crayons and pulls out a color, holding it up for the class to see. "Green," she says.

Then the students search their boxes and pronounce the word as they draw a green mark next to Asha's name on their papers.

Housed in the basement of the Central United Methodist Church, the International Learning Center provides English, mathematics and GED classes for more than 500 refugees and immigrants each year.

Currier, an international affairs major, volunteers at the center each Thursday. She said her experience has humbled her and caused her to realize "how far she has to go toward recognizing the humanity in others."

Last autumn, while helping a Laotian man create his resumé, Currier said she had subconsciously "dumbed him down" because he couldn't speak or write English as well as her. But as they filled out the resumé together, she discovered the man had a college degree in theology.

"They call me 'Teacher Brooke' and I don't deserve it," Currier said. "They are teaching me."

Putting theory into action

"When you're faced with someone who is like you in a community but has a different past and a different background -- a different way of seeing the world -- then I think self-investigation is induced because you see

something in common within someone else," said Melissa Shew, professor of the Dorothy Day community's first-semester course on the philosophy of human nature and a member of the community's advisory board. "Self-knowledge and whatever it means to have an identity does not happen in a vacuum, but is always in relation to others."



Susan Mountin, professor for the current semester's Christian

discipleship course, said the classes are shaped to help students think about social justice in new ways and then become passionate about it.

Mountain said the Ignatian pedagogy of uniting the mind with the heart takes place between the two classes. Coupled with the students' service learning, Mountain said, their classes invite them to reflect on their experiences and begin to move toward action.

"It becomes a sort of reflective spiral that takes students deeper and deeper into understanding themselves and their world, their faith and ultimately becoming more people of justice: men and women for and with others."

Currier said that when volunteering without the support of a community, it can be easy to become apathetic or theoretical about social justice.

"Then it seems a lot more impossible and removed," Currier said. "Having the privilege of living with people who want to put theory and abstract passion to work encourages you to do the same."

Nicole Fuschetti has started to translate some of her passions into action. A philosophy and social welfare and justice double major, Fuschetti first became aware of sex trafficking in the United States through fellow Dorothy Day community member Hannah Bessenecker.

Now, the two friends have planned a "Week of Love" on Marquette's campus to raise awareness of social justice issues -- especially sex trafficking in America. Part of the week will be devoted to raising money for Hope Investors, an organization committed to ending sex trafficking in Milwaukee.

Additionally, Fuschetti and Dorothy Day community members planned an event last semester called "Justice and Java" in the popular Brew Bayou coffee shop in the Alumni Memorial Union. Fuschetti said the event attracted dozens of people and featured an open mic where people presented poetry, music and monologues about social justice issues.

This February, the community sponsored a second "Justice and Java" to raise awareness and funds for Haiti's earthquake relief efforts.

From the start of the school year, Dorothy Day community members have also committed their time and efforts to sponsor a silent auction on Marquette's campus in April, with all proceeds of the auction going to the Community Learning Centers of the Milwaukee Public School system.

Fuschetti said her time spent with the members of the Dorothy Day community has caused her to rethink the

meaning of social justice.

"I take it to mean more than simply passing out favors to others. I take it to mean actually committing yourself to helping them overcome their situation," Fuschetti said.

Through her experiences at the International Learning Center, in class, and in community, Currier's understanding of social justice has taken shape around Christ's parable of the lost sheep.

"Social justice has not been this big movement for social change or push for policy change," Currier said. "It's been a push for people and individuals."

Todd said, "Whether it's this divine breath that we have or whether it's our souls [that have] been handed to us by some divine creator, there is something undeniable about being human."

She said that she increasingly finds herself frustrated by the typical models of success in American society that define human worth. "Some people might say that it's money. Some people would say that you need a family, have 2.3 children, live in suburbia and commute 45 minutes to work every day and, 'Oh good, you're successful!'" Todd said. "I fight that because I don't believe that. I can't believe that because not everyone has that. The one thing that I believe is that everyone is equally human."

Currier said that social change must start with individuals. "For me, that's what social justice is," she said. "It's recognizing the humanity of the people around you and doing everything you can to allow them to be fully human together."

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