

## **Service- Learning through Philanthropy in a Psychology of Death and Dying Course**

By Deborah White, Megan Parker, and Elizabeth Disco-Shearer

This article describes the process and results of a pilot program which allowed for student creativity and leadership in applying academic theories and concepts from a Psychology of Death and Dying course to a student philanthropy through service-learning project. As there appears to be a lack of student and community voice in the literature on service-learning, this description is derived from all three perspectives.

This pilot program was modeled after the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project (MSPP) at Northern Kentucky University where selected courses are given grant monies with which to address a community need. An aim of the project at NKU is to “integrate philanthropy into the college curriculum with the hope of advancing the development of competent student-citizens who seek to play vital roles in their community and are committed to the pursuit of the common good” (MSPP). This program allows NKU faculty to “create classes that allow students to invest in the community, enabling faculty to use student philanthropy as a service-learning pedagogy” (MSPP).

At Collin College service-learning is defined as integrating community service with academic learning while focusing on critical and reflective thinking, problem solving, social and personal development, and civic responsibility. The purpose of this pilot project was to allow students to make meaningful connections between course curriculum and the larger social environment through civic engagement. We define civic engagement as individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Additionally, the college had recently instituted a Center for Scholarly and Civic Engagement with the goal of fostering “...intellectual inquiry through collaborative actions focusing on global, national, & local issues that enrich student learning, uphold the civic purposes of higher education, and build stronger communities” (CSCE, 2007).

Four psychology courses were selected to receive a one thousand dollar service-learning through philanthropy grant in the fall semester of 2005. While this article reports on one of those

courses, two other courses in this pilot were discussed in a previous article (Smith and Brooks, 2006). A significant finding in their article was that student response to the course was very positive and that 90% of the students surveyed felt the service-learning through philanthropy project helped them in meeting the learning objectives of the course.

Service-learning has been an integral part of the curriculum in the Psychology of Death and Dying course at Collin College for many years. However, this was the first time student philanthropy would be an aspect of that pedagogy. In the past students were not only given an option of writing a research paper instead of service-learning, but could choose among several service-learning options such as training to become a hospice volunteer or a volunteer facilitator for a local organization which provides grief support to children. This semester students would work together in small groups to research and identify community needs which are related to the course curriculum, prepare a proposal for funding their chosen project and present it to the class, then collectively decide where and how to “invest” their time and grant monies. Such a student-led approach has great potential for achieving what Dr. Ed Zlotkowski contends should be the purpose of civic engagement practices, to “develop students as leaders, students as colleagues” (Zlotkowski, Longo, & Williams, 2006) and is consistent with the current emphasis on giving “greater voice to students” discussed at the 2001 Wingspread Summit on Student Civic Engagement and with the goals of Campus Compact’s *Raise Your Voice* campaign.

A course on death and dying is inevitably also a course about life, living, and coping with loss. As the psychologist Stanley Keleman contends in his book, Living Your Dying (1974) there are two levels of dying which he termed “big dying” and “little dying.” He defines “little dying” as occurring throughout our lives. He explains, “We are always losing and finding things, always breaking with the old and establishing the new.” Keleman further contends, “Our little dyings are meant to teach us what our big dying may be like.” (1974:5). There is, therefore, a great deal to be learned about death and dying by also studying living and loss. Most of the students who take this course end up in the public service sector as teachers, social workers, nurses and other health care professionals, as well as mental health professionals. It is, therefore, important to study the process of coping with loss, both for themselves and to be able to help others.

It was no surprise then that three of the seven small groups presented proposals related to the current devastation of New Orleans. The class collectively decided to focus their efforts in a “crisis response” capacity in that regard. The result of their efforts is best described in a student voice. Megan Parker emerged as a leader of this effort and has agreed to lend a student perspective to this article.

### The Student Perspective

Ralph Waldo Emerson states, “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well” (Emerson quoted in Hagberg and Leider, 1988: 105). During the fall of 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita had unrepentantly altered human existence throughout the gulf coastal states. Through Professor White’s psychology course, students were given the opportunity to offer assistance to the evacuees who were undergoing extremely unfortunate circumstances, including human rights violations, and new beginnings. We as students were introduced to a real-world predicament and were given the chance to apply theoretical concepts that were being introduced through the psychology course, as well as life lessons learned along the way. The service-learning project was academically challenging, as well as interesting. The students were allowed full control over the class project, therefore encouraging the students to be able to apply educational and social concepts in order to address a real-world problem.

Once we decided to focus on assisting the evacuees, students devised a plan to contact various agencies and organizations such as FEMA, Red Cross, faith-based organizations and public schools in order to cooperate with their efforts. We learned that the international relief organization, St. Vincent De Paul (SVDP) had rented a warehouse located a few miles from the Collin College Campus. The warehouse was being used to collect and distribute goods to the evacuees. Our class took a field trip to the warehouse and found donations were dwindling and our thousand dollars was a proverbial “drop in the bucket” compared to the needs we were discovering.

Over the next few weeks we made several trips to the warehouse. We sorted through clothing and household items, in order to help build “houses in a box.” We realized that this was an

opportunity to get our peers, professors, and community involved. We collected an itemized list from SVDP and took this to our classrooms. We got permission from our professors to speak to their classes and started a collection drive within the school. Students and professors worked together “pitching in” with donations of goods, money and services, which were collected once a week and distributed to SVDP. Some of the students within the other classrooms had taken it upon themselves to physically work at the warehouse on their own time. This had officially become a full circle moment. Our class was no longer a group of seventeen -- it was a learning environment composed of our peers and community.

Even though we were helping in the warehouse, we still did not know how to use the grant money. We contemplated presenting it directly to SVDP, or buying supplies that were needed and then giving it to the organization. As the needs were so great, we decided to devise a plan to double our grant money before giving it to SVDP. We were working against time but it was our determination and motivation that would keep our group focused. A plan was devised to buy one thousand rubber wristbands and have them inscribed with “Hurricane Help.” The company from which we ordered the wristbands was inspired by our classroom efforts and delivered the bands to us within a timely manner free of shipping and handling costs. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

When the bands arrived in mid-September, each student took fifty to one hundred bands and began selling them for two dollars each. After a week of attempting to sell the bands, we ran into a predicament. No one wanted to buy the bands. It seemed that the communities in Plano and Dallas felt they had already done enough for the cause and were reluctant to take part in additional efforts. In fact, thousands of the evacuees in our area were in dire need of assistance. We decided to go back to our peers and ask for their help. We began selling the bands around the campus and collecting even more donations of home furnishings, bedding, linens, bathroom and cleaning supplies. We began receiving positive feedback and were asked to come back to the classrooms. The word had started to spread and more professors gave us permission to speak to their classes. The classrooms were collecting supplies and we were now taking several trips a week to SVDP and dropping off the essential supplies. Yet it still was not enough.

Each of us, as well as many of our peers, began volunteering more often at the warehouse on our own time in order to build the “houses in a box.” The building of these boxes was having a profound impact on each of us. We realized how fortunate we truly were to have a place to call home. November had begun and we were halfway to our goal. The warehouse was delivering a large quantity of supplies just as quickly as they were coming in and yet they were still in need of more. The class decided to work two Saturdays at a local Sonic drive-in as car hops to add our tips to the contribution. All of the tips that were received would go to SVDP. Word of our cause spread throughout the school and community. It felt wonderful to know that our peers were coming together for a common goal.

When the school hosted its annual Art Fest, college officials gave us permission to set up a booth to gain attention for our cause. At the booth we had a sign stating our new motto: “It’s Not Over” along with some statistics to inform people that there were thousands of people in our area who still needed our assistance.

Soon the semester came to a close and it was time to count the money. We not only reached our goal, we raised more than expected. As a class, we raised exactly \$2050.50 in cash, approximately \$5,000 in goods, and hundreds of hours of service.

This disaster allowed us a real-world case study through which to learn about identifying secondary losses, as related to but distinct from, primary losses. For example, the evacuees had not only lost their homes, neighborhood and city of residence, they had also lost their jobs, mobility (cars), their friendship and community ties, their sense of safety and security, as well as the future they envisioned for themselves in New Orleans. We were learning that there might be worse things than death. As we studied suicide, we wondered whether the losses the evacuees experienced would put them at high risk for suicide, both because the hurricane had severely impacted their social ties (as per Durkheim’s theory of suicide) as well as the fact that “social disruption is an important factor in self-destructive behavior among the young” (DeSpelder and Strickland, 2005: 431).

While working on this project it became clear that the majority of the students participating had never been civically engaged. Some of the students had not worked in the community before and

others had not worked on a project of this magnitude. At the end of the semester we were invited to attend the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary banquet of SVDP. At the banquet, we were honored to receive a plaque designating Collin College as their Outstanding Academic Partner for 2005-2006. This was more than a learning opportunity; it was an introduction to civic engagement for many and a chance to discover that we could make a difference in our community.

### The Agency Perspective

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a Voluntary Organization Active in Disaster that assists the American Red Cross and FEMA during times of local and national disasters. The Society has been doing disaster relief work since the floods in Paris, France in the 1800's, but the North Texas branch had never been involved in any disaster work prior to the Hurricane Season of 2005.

As Executive Director of the North Texas branch, which is called the Dallas Council, Katrina was the greatest management challenge of my lifetime. I was in Chicago attending a National St. Vincent de Paul Conference when the leadership pulled me into a room and said that the Governor of Texas had just stated that evacuees from Louisiana were welcome in Texas and that I needed to prepare to assist these clients. I remember saying that New Orleans was a long way from Dallas. Little did I know the events that would occur in the next 30 days and continue for two years.

I flew home to Dallas the next day and on the plane I wrote a Disaster Response Plan for the Dallas Council. I called a colleague of mine who was in the military and he gave me advice on logistics, communications, staffing, volunteers etc. Within a 48 hour period of arriving back in Dallas, the Mayor asked our agency to assist with furniture collection and distribution for an 11 county area which included Collin County. I had to call an emergency board meeting, a press conference, solicit funds and open 3 warehouses throughout the region within a week. The challenge was unbelievable and I kept myself focused by thinking about the 100,000 or more displaced families that were pouring into our area seeking shelter. How could I complain about 15 hour days when they had lost everything?

The Collin County warehouse turned out to be the most successful because of great community support. One of the most heart-warming stories of volunteerism and community solidarity came from the local community college. A psychology professor, Debbie White, had allowed her fall semester students to get involved and help with disaster relief as part of a service-learning project. The students contacted my Collin County Warehouse Manager and then went to work. They were led by Megan Parker who motivated not only her class but the entire student body to get involved in fundraising and volunteerism.

The donation of time and of goods and funds was very touching as the students came through for our Collin County warehouse at a time when we had completely drained all resources and were praying for a miracle. We had assisted over 700 families at that time and had another 2800 on a waiting list. Our warehouse staff would put together household boxes for families of 4, 8, 12, etc., filled with bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom items. When the students contacted us to get involved, the shelves in the cleaning supply area were totally empty. I was drained from constantly having to solicit funds and supplies and I was frustrated that funding for one of the greatest disasters in recent history had dwindled. Then, magically the Service-Learning Project students appeared with baskets of goods to replenish our supplies. It wasn't until months later that we learned that they had created a Katrina wrist bracelet and launched an entire marketing and fundraising campaign to help with our efforts. In addition to providing these much needed supplies, the students helped us package them in a very hot warehouse, which was without air conditioning.

We were so moved by the commitment and the outcomes of the Student's Service-Learning Project that we honored Collin College and the students publicly at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of our agency, which recognized the contributions of the agencies and organizations that supported us during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

I cannot imagine that any classroom experience would have ever given the students the opportunity to make a difference in their world as did the Katrina Service-Learning Project.

## Conclusion

As I evaluate the activities of this class in light of its goals and objectives, the following conclusions can be drawn. There is no doubt that the goal of carrying out "...individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern" certainly was achieved in this class. Additionally, their efforts were consistent with the goal of "...intellectual inquiry through collaborative actions focusing on global, national, & local issues that enrich student learning, uphold the civic purposes of higher education, and build stronger communities" (CSCE 2007). Additionally, as Battistoni so aptly points out, "Service-learning can not only help students identify the problems that underlie the need for service, but it can also enhance their ability to solve public problems" (2002: 34). This certainly was the case here.

It is important to point out that the students did not actually have the grant money until the end of the term. They purchased the \$1,000 worth of wrist bands with their own money. Once they saw the incredible need at the warehouse they were virtually unstoppable. They trusted the college and each other enough to use their own money to try to meet an immediate need. This part of their learning may be consistent with the image of engagement as learning expressed by Lee S. Shulman when he asserts in *Shulman's Table of Learning* (2002) that engagement is "not a proxy for learning" but a "fundamental purpose of education." Shulman also draws attention to what he identifies as some "missing elements" of his *Table of Learning*. He identified these as the elements of emotion, collaboration, and trust. He contends:

In both the emotional and collaborative aspects of learning, the development of trust becomes central. Learners must learn to trust and to be worthy of trust. If learners are to employ their achievements of the goals of liberal and professional education to take on the responsibilities of leadership in a democratic community and society, their good judgment needs to be exercised in a context of trust and interdependence (2002, 43-44).

These students handled all the money and made all the decisions. They could not have accomplished what they accomplished without trust in each other and belief in their collective ability to make a difference. Truth be told, these students also rekindled my "inner spirit" as a

teacher. I am grateful that the structure of the grant program required me to “get out of their way” and let them lead. Student voice and leadership has potential to help faculty overcome perceived institutional barriers and to formulate effective response to community need. I know these students will continue to be active participants in the community wherever the future leads them and that community will, indeed, be fortunate to have them.

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**Megan Parker**, a former Collin College student, is currently majoring in Political Science and International Relations with a concentration in the Middle East and Africa at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. According to her mother, (also a former student of White's) Megan has been "civically engaged" since she could walk. At the age of five she helped her mother's class collect canned goods for a local homeless shelter. Megan's drive to help the less-fortunate remains as alive today as it was then.

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