History Tends to Repeat Itself
A Look Back At the Partnership of RIT and NENA
by Liz Avalos

It’s been three years now since RIT and the NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance (NENA) began working together in a partnership to bring economic development and viable business to sector 10 of the city of Rochester. In this issue of Beyond the Classroom, we take a look back at the last three years, and at the lessons that have been learned, along with the expectations of some of the key people who have made it possible.

We were able to catch up and take some time from Ann Howard, Associate Professor for the College of Liberal Arts at RIT and Learn and Serve America Project Director, as well as Delaine Cook-Greene, Shirley Edwards and Hank Herrera, who are the community leaders. They were kind enough to grant us time from their hectic schedules to meet with us and answer a few questions.

It is always with 20/20 hindsight that we reflect on things that could have been done differently, and this case is no exception. We posed the question: Looking back over the last three years, what are your thoughts on what the success of the entire project has been? In all, the responses received were overwhelmingly positive. Ann Howard said that “students’ learning has been the most rewarding aspect of the partnership” and while this was the major consensus of those persons asked, Delaine Cook-Greene added that if it were not for the President of RIT, the partnership now in existence might not have come to be.

The success of the partnership between RIT and the North East Neighborhood Alliance is apparent, but has it been what was expected? If not, how has it not? The question was posed to Hank Herrera, who responded “It’s fair to say that we didn’t know what to expect. A lot of ideas discussed in the beginning and over the last three years, talked about which ones would happen. Some that were natural, have not, others have.”

As the president of RIT leaned back in his chair, hands folded, he spoke with sincere conviction, telling me the story of a project that has exceeded all expectations. A story where two groups of people, similar in some ways, but different in others, came together to learn and partake in an ongoing relationship. Symbiotic, yes, but much more than that. Here was an internationally renowned university and an alliance of dedicated neighbors from central Rochester, working to do more together than was ever possible apart.

On a bright spring afternoon, I sat high in the vista that is the president’s office, with a commanding view of the campus. On the horizon, plainly within sight from President Al Simone’s desk, was the skyline of Rochester, looking much closer than one would expect. The connection between his campus and that city has been increasingly strengthened over the past three years, due largely in part to the work between RIT and The NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance. The president’s role in the project has been integral from the very beginning. Over the years, he has watched what was at first considered an experiment blossom into a full-fledged partnership with remarkable results. One of my first questions asked for his thoughts on the results of the partnership with NENA.

“I couldn’t be more pleased,” he said with a grin. According to Simone, there have been several keys to the success of the partnership, most importantly the creation of mutual trust between the two groups. Coupled with a genuine interest in working together, and a community interest in accessing the resources of RIT, all of the elements that would enable the success of this program were salient from the start.

“I don’t believe that there are other institution presidents in Rochester that sit and talk with grassroots leaders like the President did with us.” Shirley Edwards mentioned that “the cost would have been tremendous without RIT, if we had to pay for some of those services that the students were able to give us and the time that all the professors and the other staff have given us.”

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see HISTORY page 5

An Afternoon With Al Simone
Chatting With the President of RIT
by Kevin Ptak

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see SIMONE page 2
The first annual conference, When the Grass Takes Root: Building Partnerships Between Urban America and Higher Education, will take place on the weekend of October 2nd through October 5th. This special weekend-long conference, held at Rochester Institute of Technology Inn and Conference Center, will be more than just an informative and educational conference; it will be a unique and exciting learning experience.

Through evaluating and assessing the relationship between RIT and the NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance (NENA), participants in the conference will have the opportunity to explore issues of power, the will to change, and the dynamics of university-community partnerships.

“We would like to affect our participants in both their hearts and their heads, internalize these issues intellectually as well as emotionally,” said Meredith Dalton, the project coordinator for Learn and Serve America.

The unique partnership between RIT and NENA, which is currently in its third year, serves as the conference model for teaching others about university-community partnerships.

“We are smiling and enjoying a moment of levity, as Ms. Cook-Greene reaches a ‘R’ in her name. Reflecting for a moment, he places the picture back on the shelf, facing the door-way.”

According to Simone, one of the best partners of the partnership between RIT and NENA is the way it applies demonstrates the “R” in the acronym of RIT. The Rochester Institute of Technology has a long history, dating back to 1829, which is steeped in improving the Rochester community. The earliest ancestor of the modern university, the Rochester Athenaeum, brought guest lecturers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson in to debate and guest lecture for the benefit of the community.

A later descendant of the Athenaeum, the Rochester Mechanics Institute, was established to help train the local workforce for placement in better, more technologically advanced jobs as early as 1885. Today in 2003, RIT is still emphasizing the city from which the school draws its name. We are the Rochester Institute of Technology. Simone himself said it best: “The ‘R’ in RIT means Rochester roots, and our obligations to the community. We have to do everything we can to strengthen the community, and in the end, the stronger we will be.”

Simone continued from page 1

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The unique partnership between RIT and NENA has been apparent. After all, one of the goals of RIT is to meet the educational needs of the students. However, the most useful lesson is one that was learned outside of the classroom. As president Simone pointed out, “the single most useful lesson of any student is to have a greater sense of reality and a greater appreciation of how satisfying it can be to be able to help others and give back to the community.”

The results of RIT’s involvement cannot be measured in numbers. It must be calculated based upon the lessons and effects on both communities. Simone sees the results as fourfold: First, the effects on both communities. Simone recalls this presentation well and present because, says Simone, “it was so strong.” He also adds that he was deeply impressed by the work of the students. Because of time constraints, the presentation took place during midsummer, after several members of the design team had graduated. However, all members made the trek back to RIT to present because, says Simone, “it was so important to them. They really became involved in making this project succeed and wanted to make this presentation to us.” He also adds that he was struck by the students’ professionalism and genuine, sincere commitment to the project. The community struck him as happy and appreciative of the student’s work, and was pleased that they were able to give something back to the students by providing an avenue for them to gain experience. President Simone directs my attention to a framed photograph that sits prominently on his bookshelf. Sitting centrally in a small frame is a picture from that presentation. Both Simone and DeLaite-Cook-Greene, co-chair of the North East Neighborhood Alliance, and interaction between participants and coordinators, and meals will be provided throughout the conference.

Although the conference is targeted towards members of universities, community organizers, business people, and government officials, anyone and everyone is invited to participate. The only requirement is the desire to want to learn more about how to make a positive change in your own environment.

When the Grass Takes Root: Building Partnerships Between Urban America and Higher Education is the perfect opportunity for anyone who would like to learn more about community-university based partnerships. The pre-registration deadline is September 15, 2003.

Anyone wishing to register after the September 15th deadline may do so at an additional charge. Don’t miss out on your chance to be a part of this unique learning experience.

For more information on When the Grass Takes Root: Building Partnerships Between Urban America and Higher Education, please contact Meredith Dalton, Project Coordinator for Learn and Serve America at (585) 475-2666 or e-mail madgla@rit.edu.
Students and Volunteers Help Prepare the Gardens for Planting: A Photo Essay

Photos by Johanna Miller
Captions by Kevin Ptak

Following the April 4th ice storm, there was plenty to be done at the NENA Vineyards. Students and faculty volunteers from RIT, MCC, and U of R worked alongside community members to help tidy up and get ready for planting...

…Most of the activity was general clearing of debris and straightening of the area. There was more than enough work for everyone, in order to prepare for the spring plantings...

…With the vineyard cleared and looking ready for spring, the volunteers once again showed how much more can be accomplished through community partnership.

When we asked Ann Howard, she commented, “personally, the community’s willingness to share with us, and their unceasing efforts to help us understand their goals” was more than what was expected. Both Shirley Edwards and Delaine Cooke-Greene would agree that all levels of interaction between the students, faculty and the community have been surpassed, but would add that it’s important to recognize NENA as the lead in the Northeast area, working in conjunction with three other Neighborhood Preservation Companies: CONEA, NEBCA and Market View Heights.

Now that three years have gone by, and the question of the partnerships success and expectations have been answered with an overwhelming thumbs up, we’re left with one last question of the key people who have helped make this possible: If you could go back to the beginning, knowing what you know now, what would you have done differently? What lessons have been learned and gained from?

Shirley Edwards responded with, “Personally, I gained so much from the partnership, I learned that you don’t have all the answers and that you have to really, really listen and that you can’t be everything to everyone because you’re pulled in different directions.” She went on to say that if she could change anything, it would be the fact that she needs more staff. Although Delaine Cooke-Greene could relate with the feelings of Shirley Edwards, she replied that she would not change anything, but only stress more to the funders to trust the grass root component.

When Hank Herrera was asked the same question, he answered that he “learned early on in the neighborhood that we can’t work around the quarters and holidays, we need to modify how we do things” because while students and faculty are doing their studies and teaching, “we can’t walk away after ten weeks”. Other than that he said, everything should remain the same.

Ann Howard was approached with the same question. Her answer was that “a more formal program for initiating faculty involvement in the partnership activities” should be implemented. She went on to say that RIT’s commitment to the North East Neighborhood Alliance (NENA) is long term, but that resources will determine in the future how deeply, how frequently, and to what extent other partnership activities might develop.

It was quite evident after having interviewed some of the key people from the partnership between RIT and NENA that there was much appreciation felt from all sides. The appreciation was felt for the students of RIT, especially to those who stayed on with NENA even after their time was up and the quarter was over, to those who gave and learned more of themselves than they had anticipated learning from a college curriculum. The appreciation was also for the people and community of Sector 10 for wanting to improve the conditions of their lives, and becoming active members in their community and taking charge. It came also for the faculty and staff of RIT, for those who were involved behind the scenes, but who without their hard work, things wouldn’t have gotten done, people like Meredith Dalton, RIT’s Learn and Serve America project coordinator.

In all, hope was also abundant. The hope that other institutions in the community would find RIT to be an inspiration to them and want to follow in NENA’s footsteps. A hope that partnerships, such as the one that RIT and NENA share, could someday become commonplace.
“Raise Your Voice” is a campaign started by the National Campus Compact, an organization comprised of college and university presidents committed to promoting and enhancing service learning. It consists of a series of events helping college students become more aware of community issues, how they can get involved, and the momentum that students can initiate. National Civic Engagement week took place February 16-23, and was an aspect of the Raise Your Voice campaign that gave students a chance to celebrate current student activism and become more aware of the volunteering opportunities on campuses and in their surrounding communities.

Here at RIT, National Civic Engagement Week was organized by the Student Leadership Corps. On February 16, a student forum at RIT kicked off this national volunteer week. The forum included a student panel with four actively engaged RIT students and two Rochester City youth who work with the NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance in the city of Rochester. The panel expressed the importance of community involvement, showcased students currently dedicating their time, and also provided information for students looking to become involved. The purpose of this event was to create an interaction between students and to share their experiences in the community. They discussed how they wanted to try to get more service learning classes implemented and why they value their own community service work.

Along with the RIT student speakers, the keynote speaker was Genovea Aguilar, who came all the way from the University of San Diego. She spoke of the gentrification happening in her barrio community and how she has worked to get other students within the university to become involved. Her main point stressed the power of the people, students, and community members and how it has allowed for greater cultural understanding on campus.

The second night of celebrating Civic Engagement Week, a forum was organized within the Sector 10 community. This took place at the Freddie Thomas Learning Center. This forum was lead by the community leaders of Sector 10 in order to discuss the neighborhood’s accomplishments and continuing needs. The main speaker at this event was Congresswoman Louise Slaughter who emphasized local power, student involvement in the community, and stressed the point that everyone should have a voice in their government. The emphasis was how RIT and the community have been working together. The people attending this event said the message was powerful and everyone recognized the importance of civic engagement.

All throughout the week during the lunch hours, volunteers set up a table in the Student Alumni Union, passing out chocolate chip cookies, and information describing volunteer opportunities around campus, as well as in the Rochester community. Some of the students that helped out with this were Anne Marie Ross, Dave Campbell, and Jackie Kozack. These tables attracted over 150 people, thirty of whom signed up to get involved with other events organized by the Student Leadership Corps (SLC), coordinated by second year public policy student, Lyndsey Fisher. The SLC is specifically comprised of students that participate in projects with Sector 10. Lyndsey’s thoughts on this: “I thought the events were a great success. Students and community members that attended were interested in the different projects. Many people had no idea about what was happening in Rochester. This made them aware of issues and the action that was taking place in other communities. That was our main purpose for holding these events - too many students are unaware of how they can involve themselves and add a new aspect to their time here at RIT.”

Mary-Beth Cooper, the Vice President for Student Affairs, thought the NENA/RIT Civic Engagement Week project kickoff was a terrific opportunity for RIT’s students, faculty, and staff to hear from guest speakers the successes of a different program in a different environment. “I was happy to see that some of our students came out for the event, I only wished it was more.” The program is hoping to double or triple the attendance for next year. Cooper thinks the “celebration” mood was upbeat and is a positive way to spread the word about the power of grass-root initiatives. For more information on how to be a volunteer, contact the Student Volunteer Office at http://svc.rit.edu/ongoingEvents.php.