Learning Through Community

Summer 2008
For the second consecutive summer, the Rochester Institute of Technology was part of a community-based learning experience unlike any other. Through RIT’s ongoing partnership with the NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance (NENA), twelve students, two faculty, and one project coordinator were given the opportunity to participate in a unique ten-week experience. The NENA is a resident-driven community planning initiative located in northeast Rochester whose goal is neighborhood revitalization through citizen empowerment and ownership. The NENA-RIT Partnership was established in 2000, and the activities and projects associated with implementation of the NENA Strategic Neighborhood Action Plan has provided RIT students a chance to broaden their educational experience by applying their knowledge through community based learning.

The RIT individuals participating in the 2006 Summer Learning Community came together as an interdisciplinary team of faculty and students from Environmental Science, Public Policy, Business, Interior Design, Photography, and Civil Engineering. The students started the summer by attending a week-long orientation where they learned about the history of the neighborhood and participated in cultural competency training and team building activities. Next, they began working with the community leaders on a wide variety of projects ranging from designing plans for a model home to further developing an agriculture business.

On a weekly basis throughout the summer, the students reflected on their experience and recorded the progress made on their projects using RIT’s MyCourses website.
They also attended group meetings for discussion and planning with the other students. In addition to working on their individual projects, each student worked at least four hours per week at the Vineyard, a 2.6 acre farm located in the northeast sector of the city which is part of the NENA's Greater Rochester Urban Bounty (GRUB) initiative. By working in the Vineyard, the students were able to interact with each other and members of the community, enabling them to develop their roles as teacher-learners. They were able to use their RIT education to help teach each other as well as constantly learn from those around them. This allowed the students, faculty, community leaders and neighborhood youth to fully engage in a learning environment.

This report has been produced by RIT students and provides an insightful overview of the projects the students worked on throughout their ten-week learning experience with the NENA-RIT Partnership during the summer of 2006. To find out more about partnership activities, please go to www.rit.edu/servicelearning.

—Written by Mallory Frost

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**Summer Participants**

Alexis Beirne
Melanie Crino
Mallory Frost

Michael Herb
Ross Klimaitis
Raymond Krum

Deborah Lawrence
Cindy Lin
Jennifer Page

Stephanie Simpson
Jeanette Warner
Stephanie Zettel

Ann Howard
Meredith Dalton
Brendan Tierney

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Everyday, you could find Johnnie "Brewster" Johnson at the Vineyard. There might not be anything strange about that except Brewster's position of Farm Manager is purely volunteer.

Not only did Brewster help maintain the Vineyard, he also took a personal interest in his position this summer by sharing his knowledge of farming, growing and harvesting produce with RIT students and community youth.

"It's not about what you can get out of it," he says, "It's what you can give."

Brewster stated that the RIT students were a vital part of running the Vineyard this summer. Brewster enjoys his role at the Vineyard, but he takes the most pride in watching the students and youth grow and mature right alongside the vegetables. "Here at the Vineyard, we grow the very best vegetables/humans we can — chemical free."

Shirley Edwards is an extremely busy woman. Besides being the Executive Director of the North East Block Club Alliance (NEBCA) as well as the President of the Community Land Trust, she spent every free second she had working in the Vineyard alongside the students from the NENA-RIT Partnership. "NENA and RIT have had a very good marriage and partnership. We learn from each other and [the relationship] equally benefits both of us."

According to Ms. Edwards, one of the biggest benefits of the Partnership is that community members notice RIT students work at the Farm and have a presence in the northeast neighborhood. When she was asked by a local youth if they had to go to RIT to work at the Vineyard, she recalls being proud to answer, "No, but you can come and work side by side with the students."

Mr. Robert Vickers, the Construction Manager at the Vineyard, is one of the many community members working with RIT students during the summer. Given the task of overseeing the construction of the Agriculture Training Center, he utilized the skills and knowledge of the business, civil engineering, and environmental science students on a daily basis. In fact, he described the students as a "tremendous help, being very supportive with anything I need."

Mr. Vickers says the experience of working at the vineyard is priceless for the students. "They get to experience and see firsthand things that are happening in the world that they won’t get in the classroom." Mr. Vickers not only values the expertise the students bring to the northeast neighborhood, but says he learns as much from working with them at the Vineyard.
Jennifer Page
Civil Engineering

As the first civil engineer to become involved with the NENA-RIT Partnership, third-year student Jennifer Page was entering unfamiliar territory when she began working this summer. Longtime activist and community member, Mr. Robert Vickers, was especially happy to have Jennifer on board. Mr. Vickers, a construction manager by profession, would be using Jennifer’s help with managing the construction of the Agricultural Training Center (currently being built at the Vineyard), as well as with designing a new parking lot.

During the first few weeks, Jennifer spent time surveying the parking lot with the help of civil engineering Professor William Larsen. She also worked closely with Mr. Vickers, joining him on his many trips to City Hall where the final architectural plans for the Agricultural Training Center were being approved. Jennifer also visited many businesses with Mr. Vickers, soliciting donations for the Center. “I learned a lot about organizations and how they work – the donation process is very complicated. . . . [and Mr. Vickers] taught me how important networking is in engineering and construction and that you need to be fairly strict in order to get things done.”

Once the Agricultural Training Center plans were approved, construction took off as the existing basement foundation was finished and the framing went into place. By being at the Vineyard almost every day during the early phases of construction, Jennifer was able to further the learning she had previously done in the classroom. Her observation of the construction “really reinforced things I’d learned by being able to actually see it. It helped me to remember things and make connections in a sequential manner with the construction process. . . . I have learned things over this summer that I would never have been able to learn doing something else.”

On Saturday, August 5, 2006, the Vineyard hosted a neighborhood party involving a few hundred members from the northeast neighborhood and the Rochester community as the trusses for the Agricultural Training Center were raised. This huge milestone for the northeast community was the most memorable day of the summer for Jennifer. “The truss-raising celebration was the first time I really took a step back and thought about everything that was going on around me and the first time I felt the Vineyard was partly mine. Seeing everyone enjoy themselves was one of the most rewarding parts of this summer. It was an event that was close to my heart.”

As a result of her summer work with Mr. Vickers, Jennifer has lined up connections for future co-op and job opportunities. More importantly, she was extremely pleased with her experience. “I was so happy to be a member of this summer’s program . . . and to have met everyone working at the Vineyard this summer, whether it be people from RIT, the neighborhood leaders, or the local youth. Every person has had a story or made an impact on me that I will never forget.”
Prior to the summer of 2006, the NENA-RIT Partnership began making plans to collaborate with School 45, an elementary school located in the northeast neighborhood. Environmental Science graduate student Alexis Blondrage also became involved with the NENA-RIT Partnership during the spring quarter when she began focusing on this collaboration as the foundation for her master’s thesis. Through the Partnership, Alexis researched New York State curriculum standards for elementary students and began developing a partnership with School 45.

To prepare for her project, Alexis spent the first portion of the summer researching curriculum activities for a variety of ages as well as developing a working relationship with Assistant Principal Carlos Laal. Alexis was then teamed up with Jen Wolford, a second-grade teacher who was teaching third and fourth graders during summer school. Alexis notes, “I took this opportunity to test some of the activities I had been planning all summer. The first couple of days in the classroom I just observed what was going on . . . [then] I took some of the ideas I had for my activities and made sure it directly connected with what fourth-graders should be learning.”

When Alexis was given the chance to teach the class, she talked with the students for two days about nutrition, where food comes from, and how it grows. On the third day, she organized a field trip to the Vineyard, located only a half a mile from the school. The students were given a tour and could actually see the produce growing, just as they had talked about in the classroom. The students planted pumpkin seeds and helped harvest green beans. For Alexis, this was the most memorable day of the summer, “I was very nervous about them not enjoying it, or not liking being there, but they absolutely loved the tour and were very excited about pointing out the many fruits and vegetables that we had talked about in class the two days before. They didn’t want to leave!”

By working with School 45, Alexis learned how the school district works and how important communication is after making the proper connections within the school. “The connection with Mrs. Wolford was critical,” Alexis says after being invited to continue working with the teacher through the fall. “Now that it is in place, I should have no problem going ahead with the rest of my research.”

In addition to working with School 45, Alexis spent several days a week working at the Vineyard, which was a crucial part of her research. “I learned quite a bit about farm management and was able to see firsthand what went into keeping a garden like this in production, [and this was] important when it came to my curriculum development. [Also knowing the neighborhood leaders] made it possible for me to connect my plans at School 45 with the activities at the Vineyard.”

By working with the Partnership, Alexis was able to enhance her graduate thesis work and connect her classroom experiences at RIT with the Rochester community. “The community initiatives are amazing,” she says. “Seeing the work in progress and then have a positive outcome is really great. I learned a lot about what I can do on my own, and I thoroughly enjoyed seeing my work in action.” Alexis is currently continuing her work with Mrs. Wolford and aspires to work in education in the future.

—Written by Mallory Frost
While flipping through the pages of this publication, reading stories of success and growth, it's easy to see benefits of RIT and NENA's summer service-learning program. But there are even deeper benefits hidden just below the surface. That's why RIT student Raymond Krom spent his summer researching the basis and heart of the program itself—to uncover how and why the program is successful.

A graduate student in microelectronic engineering, Ray observed and compiled his research about the service-learning program by conducting interviews, attending meetings, and even volunteering his own time to work at the Vineyard over the summer. With a focus on engineering, Ray compared the effectiveness and methods of the NENA-RIT partnership with programs at other universities including Illinois Institute of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Purdue University.

A deeper look at similar programs meant a fuller understanding of the types of methods used all around the country. In his findings, Ray noted that while an array of methods are used, the key to any successful program is the ability to identify a need and create a program with solid communications between members—something RIT and NENA do successfully, says Ray.

Ray found through his interviews that student volunteers were "extremely happy" to be doing something different while aiding in the community. During a final meeting, many students expressed deep admiration of the project and admitted (though it was obvious already) that participating had enlightened their "softer skills," such as forming relationships with others, communicating effectively, or humbly learning from coworkers. These skills were strengthened and nurtured through reflective communication—one method Ray reported was important to every service-learning program he studied.

"Reflection is probably the most important aspect of any program," says Ray. "It provides feedback to administration and crystallizes the thought of each student involved." Such feedback, Ray was glad to report, was avidly promoted and encouraged during the NENA-RIT summer program. Progress of the projects was recorded through use of RIT's MyCourses website. Students were required to enter reflective journal entries and attended weekly meetings to discuss the status of their projects.

Through service learning, students can provide information to the community about what a discipline really is, or about what its experts really do.

"Not everyone knows what microelectronic engineers really do or create since we can't build something cool in a garage," says Ray. "But microelectronic engineers are in a unique position to make an impact at the high school level where the iPod, cell phone or tiny digital cameras reign supreme. Because we have worked to create the technology students use today, we have a plethora of examples to show students, telling them, 'This is what you can do with what you're learning now.'"

Ray's research has already been of use to RIT faculty. His ability to define service-learning and comparatively study the advantages of several programs will continue to aid faculty during the beginning of a new service-learning program between a local high school and RIT. Reflective journal entries and other successful communication methods will be used as Ray has advised.

Written by Rebecca Nelson
This summer, Ross Klinedinst, an RIT business student, took on three projects for the NENA-RIT Partnership. The knowledge he brought to the table proved to be a valuable resource for the community, and his experience altered his perspective on the world outside the classroom.

Ross initially focused his attention on the Vineyard, starting from the ground up by getting down in the dirt and helping weed, harvest, and maintain the garden. Once the produce was cleaned, Ross worked side by side with other RIT students and community members to sell the fruits and vegetables at the Public Market. This experience made him realize there were a variety of factors that affected the sales such as the location of the Vineyard’s stand, as well as the weather. “We had some good days as people ventured over to our stand on nice days where our pick of the day sold well.” Instead of settling for selling only at the market, Ross began planning other ways to improve the sales of the Vineyard’s produce.

Ross’s first step to bolster sales was to analyze the research provided to him, consider the sales recommendations, and implement ideas that were the most cost-efficient and productive for sales. In addition, Ross brought his knowledge of promotion to the Public Market to increase sales with the help from members of the community, to whom Ross says, “much thanks and credit goes to them and their talents.” Before finishing his work with the Vineyard, Ross focused his attention towards the operational efforts of running the Vineyard in the future. He acknowledged that a permanent solution to the labor shortage is one of the next steps needed in keeping the Vineyard an important productive part of the community. Ross remembered what businessman Raymond Tierney had told him at the beginning of the summer “Growing is easy, selling will be the challenge.”

Ross also helped with the construction of the Agricultural Training Center, where he was “learning more than teaching.” He helped raise the trusses, moving one beam after another while watching the building take shape. Ross acknowledged his efforts were merely the “culmination of much previous planning and many labor hours spent working on the center by various parties.” Ross hopes to continue his work at the Vineyard this fall with Mr. Robert Vickers.

The work Ross accomplished this summer was just as valuable to him as it was to the neighborhood. His projects provided him with a sense of “real world” experience by bringing him out of the classroom and into the lives of individuals. Ross reflected, “Learning about the challenges and adapting to meet those needs will allow us to best serve NENA, develop our thoughts, and challenge our learning experiences.”

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Stephanie Zettel has always felt a love for community and a need to share with others. The environmental science graduate student has always known she was called to serve and learn from other individuals. But she didn’t know that she was “lion-hearted” until she spent long workdays at the Vineyard this summer.

As part of her master’s thesis research, Stephanie’s task was to assess the Vineyard’s resources to determine the best method for farm management. Through participant observation and interviews, Stephanie was able to document the workdays of key community members. Stephanie herself worked at the Vineyard three days a week, assisting Johnnie “Brewster” Johnson, the farm manager.

“I wanted to focus solely on data collection methods,” says Stephanie. “but honestly, I think I got more information little by little through working there.” She made sure enough crops were harvested on Wednesdays and Fridays to provide for both the CSA’s (Community Supported Agriculture program) as well as NENA’s sales at the Rochester Public Market. CSAs are buying club members who receive a bundle of freshly harvested vegetables each week. In addition, Stephanie set up and ran the sales at the Public Market each week.

While Stephanie provides a service for the community, she is also learning valuable lessons in her own life. One of the most touching moments she recalls from the summer was spent with Mr. Vickers, a community member with whom Stephanie worked closely.

“I spent about half an hour in the used clothing room of Mr. Vicker’s church talking about civic responsibility and being involved. He called me ‘lion hearted,’ and to get a compliment from a man such as Mr. Vickers... someone who does so much for everyone else, with such a passion...was such an honor—it was beyond words. He really tries to inspire the people he works with to keep carrying on, and he definitely inspired me.”

Inspiration from community members is just one of the many benefits Stephanie and other students have reported after spending a summer in service learning. Through her analysis and service, Stephanie is presently creating a farm management plan for the Vineyard. She is still spending her time working and observing at the Vineyard to recommend future action and is developing a resource manual for future farm managers. “RIT has been an amazing home for my work, full of supportive faculty and opportunities,” says Stephanie. “I consider myself fortunate that in my thesis work I am able to combine two of my greatest loves in life—farming and communities—and to enable community members to help others.”

—Written by Rebecca Nelson.
Having been involved with the NENA-RIT Partnership for several years, this summer was nothing new for Photojournalism student Jeanette Warner. Prior to the summer, Jeanette was a major contributor as staff photographer for the quarterly publication, “Beyond the Classroom,” as well as working directly with the youth at the North Street Recreation Center in the northeast neighborhoods. During the summer, Jeanette continued documenting the Partnership’s activities, increased the time she spent at North Street, and helped coordinate a summer youth program at the Vineyard.

Although Jeanette is accustomed to photographing on a daily basis, working with the Partnership over the summer allowed her to better understand how it can impact daily life. “I had a freedom I don’t usually have in my classes, but I think the most important part was to see how my skills can be applied to the real world to make a difference.” Jeanette also notes, “This summer I was able to see and experience working in a community different than what I grew up in – I think that makes you more culturally sensitive. I have a greater understanding of what it means to be an outsider walking into a completely different environment... it’s important to experience this first-hand in order to truly understand.”

Although Jeanette is known for photography when she’s at RIT, she is known for her work with the North Street youth when she is in the northeast neighborhoods. She regularly teaches a Wednesday evening art class at the North Street Recreation Center, where children and adolescents ranging in ages from six to sixteen show up for a brief lesson about a famous artist or artistic style, and then complete a project based on what they learned. In addition, Jeanette spends time with many of the youth on other days as well, working on developing individual relationships. Over the summer, she helped organize and run a summer program partnering youth from North Street and Baden Street Settlement House with the Vineyard. Besides working in the garden, the youth participated in a program to deepen their understanding of community and how they can have an effect on their own neighborhood.

One long-time North Street participant, Kalisha Garcia, age 16, has known Jeanette for almost a year and helps her with supervising the youth. Kalisha says of Jeanette, “She really knew how to get kids involved; she always introduced herself to everyone, was really friendly, and made everyone feel welcome... Jeanette wanted everyone to always have fun, and she has such a positive attitude. The other girls and I admire Jeanette so much - she’s a great role model!”

Jeanette is currently on co-op with the Partnership this fall and is continuing both the documentation of neighborhood activities and her work with youth from North Street. She plans to join the Peace Corps, saying her work with the northeast community had a big impact on finalizing that decision. By working for the Partnership, she is pleased she has been able to measure her success in a whole new way, stating, “When I’m in class, I might hand in a book of pictures at the end of the quarter and say, ‘This is what I did,’ but this summer, I can spread my arms out wide and say, ‘Look, this is what I helped to do,’ and I just feel so proud of that.”

—Written by Mallory Frost
Homeownership implies luxury and freedom. However, owning a home also means more responsibility and constant maintenance. Tasks such as mowing the lawn, fixing broken appliances, and regular upkeep can be a burden at times. Last summer, two undergraduate students had the opportunity to work with the NENA-RIT partnership on a booklet teaching homeowners strategies for keeping their homes updated while saving money in the process.

Mallory Frost (pictured top) and Melanie Ciufò (pictured right), both fourth-year interior design students at the Rochester Institute of Technology, worked on the booklet detailing various ideas of maintaining homes from exterior to interior. Melanie and Mallory both did research for the booklet, learning that homeowners not only want to know how to keep their homes in tip-top condition, but also how to do this in cost-effective ways.

Melanie, who is also majoring in marketing, did the cost analysis, which would eventually be formatted to fit the booklet. Mallory worked more on the designing, figuring out a way to make all the information easy to read and understand. Throughout the course of the weeks, Mallory also designed and sketched eight potential floor plans for a model home using AutoCAD.

Working with neighborhood leaders on a possible model home design, Melanie was surprised by how much time the neighborhood leaders, Mr. Bob Vickers and Ms. Shirley Edwards, had already put into the housing project, stating “it was enlightening to see . . . how much more they know than I do about the subject even though it’s my field of study. They both seem to be very determined and they know if we build a good design it will sell, and they’re very confident. Their energy was very encouraging to Mallory and me, and gave us the fuel we needed for the week.” By simply working with experienced people in her specific field, Melanie was able to learn first-hand what an interior designer does and gained insight in the process of building and producing a final project.

For ten weeks, Mallory and Melanie not only worked on a booklet aimed at enhancing homeownership, but also learned valuable lessons about working together with a diverse group of people. Mallory says “ultimately what will stick with me for years to come is the ability to look back and remember the conversations I had with people, the way they made me think about things and look at things differently, working together and feeling like you really fit in and are welcomed and belong to the group you’re with.”

—Written by Hye Ilm Yi
While some participants of the NENA-RIT partnership spent their summer working at the youth center and designing model houses, Michael Herb, Deborah Lawrence, and Stephanie Simpson looked at the community on a broader scale. The team of public policy graduate students analyzed the NENA-RIT partnership in an attempt to measure the outcomes and impact of the program by observing from the perspective of both the community and university.

Michael, Deborah, and Stephanie used their knowledge of public policy analysis by stepping back to see the big picture of the program. The three evaluated the partnership both as a collection of individual projects and as a whole. First, they focused on getting to know the members of both the community and the partnership in order to understand the program. Towards the end of the summer, the three began conducting interviews with RIT faculty, students, Institute representatives, and members of the community. They are continuing the interviews throughout the fall.

Next, they compiled a list of all Partnership projects, along with their descriptions and current status, organizing them in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. A project matrix was used as a tool to determine how the projects benefited the Partnership, utilized Partnership resources, and interconnected. They found that many projects focused on the same aspect of the community and sometimes led into each other. This project matrix was a starting point for a network model, which is a visual diagram of people, organizations, and events interconnected using lines and arrows to show how each piece of the set is associated and affects the other pieces. “The network model is a visual way for members of the community, RIT, and outside funders to see how all of the projects, organizations, and other resources provided to the partnership are being used,” said Stephanie. “The model also has the potential to spark ideas about new ways to use old resources, or areas where new projects could be developed.”

In addition, Michael, Deborah, and Stephanie designed a youth survey over the summer. The group spent time coming up with reflective interview questions as well as laying out the survey in order to make it easy to understand and answer. The questionnaire covered topics such as how local youth feel about the North Street Community Center, the summer gardening program, as well as their community in general. After the survey was finished, the group obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before administering it to community youth.

This evaluation of the NENA-RIT Partnership as a whole is a long process. "One of the most important lessons I have learned from this summer is that program evaluations take months, even years," said Michael. The team of students compiled data in order to begin understanding the overall impact of Partnership in the community and how it is benefiting all parties. Michael, Deborah, and Stephanie each gained valuable experience in their field while also collecting information to further ensure progress in the community and the continuation of the Partnership. "I am happy I got to experience something completely new this summer," says Michael. While this evaluation is still being completed, the progress for NENA continues to exemplify the determination of a community and the sense of social responsibility from its supporters.

—Written by Geoffrey Shearer
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