Learning Through Community:

Featuring:
David Clarke
Lisa Barker
Andrew Prelusky
Stephanie Reigelsperger
Katelyn Savidge
Kristen Denninger
Allison Ingles
Dove Russo
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Summer at the Vineyard
Growing Together

During the Summer of 2007, seven RIT students worked in collaboration with nine urban youth in a unique learning community.

Building off of Rochester Institute of Technology's successful partnerships with community organizations in the northeast neighborhoods of the city of Rochester: Allison Ingalls, Stephanie Rieglspurger; David Clarke, Andrew Prelusky; Kristen Dennis; Katelyn Sawidge; and Lisa Barker each worked on projects specific to their areas of study and spent time each week working alongside urban youth and community volunteers at the Vineyard, Rochester's only urban farm run by the Greater Rochester Urban Bounty.

The goals of this learning community were to foster an ethic of community-based learning and civic engagement for all participants; develop skills in leadership; community-based participatory research, and cultural competency; encourage the development of youth-led solutions to community concerns; provide linkages for neighborhood youth to RIT students and programs; and create a leadership team that would recruit and mentor new participants in succeeding years.

Ann Howard, RIT Associate Professor and Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) Director; Meredith Dalton, COPC Coordinator; Shirley Edwards, NorthEast Block Club Alliance (NEBCA) Executive Director; and Dove Russo, AmeriCorps VISTA member designed and coordinated the program. Through projects previously identified by community leaders, the RIT students were selected based on their program of study and interest in community building. The 2007 summer program grew from two previous summer programs, as well as a newly incorporated youth-centered learning community. This aspect of the program was developed during the spring of 2007, with a course entitled Democracy Through Photography: A Photo Literacy Learning Community. This 13-week course, which connected RIT photojournalism students with eight youth from the North Street Recreation Center, established an important dialogue between the RIT students and young members of the northeast community that allowed each group to learn from one another and set the frame for developing the summer learning community. In the months leading up to the summer, youth were identified as potential leaders for the summer program, through their previous participation with the Vineyard as well as in the photography class.

The summer began for the RIT students with a week-long orientation that introduced them to the history of northeast Rochester and the Greater Rochester Urban Bounty. In addition, the RIT students were introduced to the theory and practice of problem-posing inquiry and community-based participatory research. A second orientation was held with the youth participants. The summer program included workshops, led by the RIT students, that gave the youth a chance to get involved with different community-based projects, such as GRUB marketing plans, environmental science and GIS neighborhood mapping, and photography and design to contribute to marketing and promotional materials. The workshops also provided the RIT students a valuable opportunity to deepen their own understanding of the community, through the perspectives and insight of community youth. Everyone spent dedicated time working in the Vineyard, planting, cultivating, harvesting and preparing produce for sale. Many observed that time spent working together in the Vineyard was the most enriching part of the summer experience.
David Clarke is a fifth year environmental science major with a recently discovered passion for urban planning. Having just declared this as his minor, he was able to use the knowledge he has already acquired in the area of GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping technology to contribute to the summer learning community. Using GIS, Dave developed several maps of the Vineyard and the surrounding areas for The Greater Rochester Urban Bounty (GRUB) and NEBCA.

During the workshops with the youth, Dave was introducing the kids to the concept of GIS mapping, discussing the basics of how maps can be used and interpreted differently to show and learn different collections of facts. One of the key workshops was a walking tour of the neighborhood surrounding the Vineyard. The route was designed largely in collaboration with the youth, who in the process were able to teach the RIT students a little bit about their neighborhood while learning to look critically at its components. Dave took notes on available green space, empty lots, and vacant properties, and used the information to lead a discussion with the youth about the possibilities for furthering the vision of the community by changing these spaces into assets like the Vineyard.

Dave enjoyed experiencing the cultural richness of the northeast neighborhood that the learning community provided a firsthand glimpse into, and felt that the opportunity to get to know people who have had a variety of different life experiences was a crucial feature of the summer. He emphasized the importance of the RIT community developing and maintaining a sense of diversity in the coming years. “There is no better way to learn about the world and how it works than to talk to people who have been there and experienced it.”

The benefits of the interconnectedness of different smaller communities were also tangibly illustrated for Dave through his experiences. He was able to gain a clear concept of the positive effects that the Vineyard and GRUB were having on the community, and in turn, the impact that RIT as a partner was having by working with these organizations. He was impressed by the partnership’s ability to connect people with resources and creatively fill the needs of the community and the Vineyard through well thought out student involvement.
A Learning Process
Building Foundations

Photographer finds great value in community: great hope for the future.

Lisa Barker, a 4th year photojournalism student, joined the summer learning community after participating in the “Democracy through Photography” class at the North Street Recreation Center during the spring quarter of 2007. This class, taught by five RIT photojournalism students, brought an understanding of photography as a tool for observing community for eight of Rochester’s youth at the Recreation Center. Some of the youth who participated in the photo class also joined the community. Lisa notes, “I really enjoyed working with the program this summer. For me it was really wonderful to get to continue working with some of the kids that I worked with in the photography class and to get an opportunity to further relationships with them. I felt that the structure of the summer really enabled us to develop more genuine relationships with the kids because we were able to interact in a wider variety of contexts such as hands on work in the fields, teaching in workshops, group discussions and downtime.”

“I really believe that there is a huge power in these two groups coming together...”

Lisa was responsible for several activities and projects during the summer, including photographing and documenting summer activities. Lisa photographed RIT students working together in workshops and team meetings. She also developed a photographic record of everyone working together at The Vineyard. Lisa also applied her talents and skills by making flyers to promote the Vineyard at the Monroe County Fair. In addition, she led workshops for the youth on photography, design, and the media. As a continuation of her work with North Street youth in the spring, Lisa also prepared a publication showing the work of the “Democracy through Photography” class, and coordinated exhibitions of the class projects at several locations in the city.

Through all of these experiences Lisa notes that she gained a better understanding of the context and background of the lives of kids that have grown up in the city. For her that is especially important because she hopes to work in urban settings with inner city children and youth after college, and this kind of experience provided a good foundation for her future work.

Lisa also observes that the Summer Learning Community was good experience as well in terms of community and RIT. She especially enjoyed seeing such a diverse group of students with a variety of backgrounds and skill sets coming together in the common interest of, ultimately, community development. As she says, “It was kind of like opening a toolbox from a thrift store and trying to see what could be made to work from what was available. I think among the seven of us there was a wealth of skills and experience. It was really interesting to see what assets different majors had that they could contribute to the overall effort and to get to learn a bit from each other in the process.” Coming together as an interdisciplinary team was important to Lisa and as she says was “more than just the sum of its parts.” She also valued the opportunity to work with neighborhood leaders, particularly conversing with and learning about Ms. Edwards and her role in GRUB and the Vineyard. Lisa says that this experience helped her to understand the concept of grassroots-based community development, noting that this is not what some would ordinarily expect to get out of being a student at RIT.

The Summer Learning Community also allowed Lisa to see more possibilities for potential programs in the future. Lisa loves the idea of collaborative learning between city youth and college students. Lisa observes that “both have so much to learn from each other and I really believe that there is huge power in these two groups coming together to dispel the preconceived stereotypes that are so common in our communities.”
Andrew Prelusky

Creative Community
New Perspectives

Bringing creative visions to life, a student gets a new vision of the place he's lived for years.

Andrew Prelusky, a New Media Information Technology student, was a great asset to have on the GRUB Learning Community this summer. The skills he developed through his school work prepared him for his hands on experience creating and modifying the GRUB webpage; as well as creating several pamphlets and publications for GRUB. When asked what he most enjoyed about the summer he said, "Working with the youth groups. I could be having a tired day and get perked up the second I stepped into the gazebo." The gazebo was the location where, along with his fellow RIT students, he prepared lessons and taught the youth about his field. Working with the youth was a great experience for Andrew and added a lot of fun energy to his summer job.

In addition to completing the GRUB website, Andrew was able to lead lessons with the youth about several different topics. One discussion included making a flash animation of a fellow co-worker bobbing her head. He was pleased to be able to teach such lessons that would catch the youths' attention while still incorporating new topics into their work week. Another discussion included using Photoshop. The youth took an interest in this computer program and jumped at the opportunity to try it for themselves. Many of the kids had mentioned they would like to learn more information about Photoshop and other creative computer programs.

The day of the field trip to the RIT campus, Andrew jumped at the opportunity to join and show his co-workers his "home." "It just felt nice to show everyone around the school I've been attending for four years. Even the most mundane stuff I've grown accustomed to was interesting to them. It made me realize that I shouldn't take this place for granted." Andrew appreciated the opportunity to show the kids through his college building as well as the other more fun areas of the campus, such as the gym, dorms and student alumni union building.

"Even the very most mundane stuff I've grown accustomed to was interesting to them. It made me realize that I shouldn't take this place for granted." This summer was also an eye opener for Andrew. Seeing the world outside of RIT and Henrietta for one of the first times was very engaging to him. "I've gone to school for a good 4 years here, and it was among the first times I've gone outside of that suburban bubble that surrounds our school." This experience taught him that "you can't judge an entire area on the bad things that happen there. Surrounding the Vineyard were stories of problems, but inside, everyone I met was helpful and kind." It was inspiring to him to see so many students and staff wanting to work toward the greater good together. Andrew joyfully remarked: "It makes me happy that there are people out there that care for the community."
Stephanie Reigelsperger

An Experience to Remember
Nurturing Change

How an RIT Senior applied her coursework to benefit the greater good, and the great good she gained from it.

Stephanie Reigelsperger is a 2007 graduate of the Nutrition program. Her experienced background enabled her to contribute greatly to the learning community, as well as to the greater northeast neighborhood. She worked on gathering information for the second edition of the GRUB cookbook, which will consist of recipes contributed by community residents. She was invited to represent GRUB at the annual health fair held at the Anthony Jordan Health Center, and several other meetings focused on health, where she distributed a survey assessing the need for nutrition programs in the community. She led multiple focus groups with the youth at the Vineyard that were planned with the goal of gathering research on food-seeking behaviors of city youth and their nutritional habits, and held weekly workshops that addressed specific questions of nutrition brought up by the youths themselves. The topics they covered ranged from reading food product labels to sports nutrition, and Stephanie saw considerable gains in the youth's knowledge and interest in the topics over the course of the summer.

Stephanie, a native to Rochester, has always felt a part of the local community. However, the summer experience was eye-opening for her in terms of the smaller communities that can exist within larger communities, and was a tangible example of the importance of smaller communities coming together to work towards a common goal. "I think many times smaller communities are never given a true voice," she said. She enjoyed the opportunity that the summer program provided to simply sit down with people within the community and learn about their culture. "I think in college we get to interact with many different people within our college community, but we are rarely given the chance to go out into other communities to learn about other cultures and customs." In turn, feeling truly accepted by the northeast community was a particularly meaningful part of the summer for Stephanie; participating in events such as cookouts at the Vineyard helped deepen the connections she felt.

Experiencing this summer as a conclusion to her time at RIT made an impact on Stephanie with respect to the possibilities that can be realized through efforts to engage college students with the wider local community. "I always thought college was a place you sit and learn about the real world, but never actually practice anything that you learn. This was a great way to learn how to incorporate what I learned at RIT and actually apply to it to the greater good; the good of another community," she said of the learning community, adding that what she learned will stick with her long after the summer. "I often find myself returning to the experiences that I learned this summer when trying to solve current dilemmas in new environments... I know I will never have an experience similar to this again in my lifetime."

"I know I will never have an experience similar to this again in my lifetime."
Katelyn Savidge
Building Future Success
Finding Balance
Katelyn Savidge gains a new perspective on inner city communities, and realizes a goal to help teens.

Thankful to be a part of this summer’s learning experience, Katelyn Savidge, an interior design student jumped at the opportunity to join the team. The community summer experience was extremely beneficial for her understanding of different cultures within one city. Adaptation was a skill she quickly learned during the duration of her first week with GRUB. Throughout the summer she was able to gain first-hand and real-work knowledge of her field. “In class we are given the learning tools to success; however, this summer opportunity gave me the opportunity to put my knowledge to task, and by doing so, I gained...”

“this summer... gave me the opportunity to put my knowledge to task...”

communicating for business purposes. Research was also a big part of her summer task. “Designing for the public (for all ages) requires allot of research and understanding of the users. It is important to find the best balance, while maintaining creativity, function and harmony within the space.”

Kate was asked to help with the designing of the North Street Teen Center. She said that her experience there was incredible. One of her life goals was to be able to make a big difference for teens using recreation centers. “I believe that Teen Centers can truly aid to the future success of its users and I am so thrilled that I could be a part of this change in the space.”

She described her favorite moment of the Summer Learning Community to be one of the final days the group was together just relaxing and celebrating their accomplishments at Mendon Ponds. Kate feels that this summer experience truly helped change her perspective on inner city schools. “I really enjoyed spending time with the youth this summer and being apart of this Learning Community. We were all able to let our previous perspectives go; which enabled us to learn and grow from each other.”

This summer experience has opened her eyes even more than ever before. She learned that great change can happen during just one summer, and that even one small farm in a city can impact the lives of many. She was grateful to have been a participant in this learning community and greatly benefited from its purpose. “It was a life experience I will never forget! I really loved waking up to work on the farm and learn from my co-workers.”
A Community of Inspiration Learning Together

Kristen Denninger finds inspiration in kids coming together to help change their community.

Kristen Denninger is a 2nd year Environmental science student. This summer, much of her involvement with the learning community centered around the gathering of research on nature deficit and its impact on human life, physically, psychologically, and emotionally. She spent a lot of time studying existing literature documenting the subject and putting together her findings to establish a twenty-page annotated bibliography that included a summary of how the problem of a nature deficit affects the Rochester community in particular. Of her findings, she noted that a deficiency of nature—commonly experienced in inner-city neighborhoods—was often tied to increased violence and a lack of physical development. “Kids that don’t spend time outside are missing out on important aspects of development.

To help with this research, Kristen held focus groups with this summer with the youth that centered around the question of nature—whether nature was a part of their lives, if they got a chance to interact personally with it. “A lot of them were active outdoors with sports, but that’s still not the same as having open spaces to play in and really explore for themselves.”

Kristen also worked at nearby School 45 towards creating an Agriculture Club for fourth-grade students, in which they could utilize the assets of the Vineyard in activities to learn more about natural processes. The work she did ultimately culminated in a list of projects for the students to engage in in the upcoming school year; which she mapped out and planned in accordance with the overall goal of following the school’s existing science curriculum and furthering it by providing the kids with hands-on experience to make the subject more likely to stick with them.

“I had never really thought about the idea of community-based participatory research before, or seen it put into action. I never realized how much more effective it could be than others just coming in from outside to find something out,” Kristen said of the summer. “It’s inspiring to see people that want to be the change in their communities, and especially to see the kids so involved.”

“It’s inspiring to see people that want to be the change in their communities, and especially to see the kids so involved...”
Learning that there is more to activism than war and politics, one student finds her grass roots.

Prior to this summer’s learning community, Allison Ingalls began working on efforts for GRUB through school work at Rochester Institute of Technology. Through out the summer, the vineyard benefited greatly with the addition of this business student. She brought to the table many valuable business practices, in addition to aiding with the business protocol of GRUB. Allison also took great pleasure in sharing her knowledge with the youth.

“The learning community has really opened my eyes to what ‘community’ really means. Combining a college education with the experience of ‘real-life’ in the Northeast neighborhoods, is something that I think every student should be able to experience.” As a business student she has been surrounded by BIG business and corporate culture, but never anything like this, at the “grass roots level.” Her experience reaching out to people in the community instilled in her some great values and meaningful memories.

“This summer working with the youth was by far my most exhilarating experience.” Leaving the confines of a university (and her small town home), required Allison to adapt to the real life scenarios of living in the city. She was able to connect to the youth and bring business knowledge that was understandable while still discussing broader issues that required the youth to think outside the box. Over the summer, Allison was able to create some great connections with the youth, and hopes that she has enriched their lives as much as they have hers. Through this program and the support of our advisors, Allison finally made the jump to apply for the Peace Corps. Her work on the farm and with the youth led her to conclude that communities in America need more attention.

“TThis summer, working with the youth was by far my most exhilarating experience.”

Learning from Farmer Dick led her to appreciate his talents and agricultural knowledge. She enjoyed his sense of humor and companionship, while working in the fields. Her involvement in GRUB has helped her develop more confidence in herself and her abilities to work in the Peace Corps next year.

Her commitment to design a new strategy to better fit the needs of GRUB with analyzing the previous business practices. She discovered the many challenges of a non-for-profit and created a way to better organize their work. She also arranged to have an exhibit display stand at the Monroe County Fair to promote GRUB. Having some of the youth on hand at the stand she realized how well they have incorporated her lessons into their own understandings. Concluding that in the future, they would all make very good marketers. The stand was one of the many successes Allison had this summer. She was delighted to add that this was her best summer job ever!
Dove Russo
Spreading Awareness
Providing Motivation

Americorps volunteer Dove Russo uses her unique perspective to help others learn to take action.

Dove Russo’s involvement in the summer learning community was the culmination of a year-long commitment to the RIT-Community partnership. Dove was placed there with the Americorps VISTA program as the Youth and Community Development Director. Prior to the summer, Dove worked with the neighborhood youth at the North Street Recreation Center on different issues all relating back to community development. She helped to develop and coordinate the spring photography class that was one of the first youth centered components of the partnership while simultaneously developing the entire curriculum for the youth component of the summer program. Dove is a graduate of Buffalo State with a major in women’s studies, and she has an extensive background in social change and community development.

Through her previous work with Alternatives for Battered Women and several other advocacy organizations, she has developed a comprehensive background in working with at-risk populations that was useful in her work in the northeast neighborhoods of Rochester. Her passion lies in motivating youth to become socially aware and thereby active in their communities through engaging in the democratic process. The workshops she led over the summer covered topics such as poverty and welfare in America, the history of community organizing, and the civil rights movement, each taught through the lens of how it related back to the current work at the Vineyard.

Even though there were challenges, as is often the case in new programs at the end of the day I’m proud of the great things these kids are accomplishing.” At the end of her work with the community, Dove will be going on to work with youth development in Kenya through the Peace Corps.
Christine Kray

Collectively Educating A Working Partnership

A teacher brings community concepts to life by posing questions, and inspiring minds to think together.

Christine Kray is an associate professor of anthropology at RIT. This was her first time being involved with the summer Learning Through Community program, though she had experience working previously with GRUB and the Vineyard through class projects done by her Qualitative Research Methods and Social Movements courses. The opportunity to work with students on individual projects as well as with the city youth was new and exciting for Professor Kray, who had a “complex and changing role” in the program over the course of the summer. One of her primary responsibilities was to provide guidance on community-based participatory research projects with the RIT students. She worked most closely with Stephanie Regeisperger, helping her to develop the cookbook project and open it up to the community by discussing it at several community health-related meetings. Additionally, during the last two weeks of the summer after the RIT students had completed their involvement with the program, Kray organized a research project for the youths. With Kray’s direction, they researched ideas to develop plans for a new interior design scheme at the North Street Recreation Center. She helped the kids to prepare and carry out interviews and organize their information, which was subsequently passed off to Katelyn Savidge to help her with her project at North Street. In addition to these structured activities, Kray also invited students and kids to learn about healthy foods and new recipes, which always culminated in a fun cooking and eating experience enjoyed by everyone.

Kray was thrilled to be able to contribute her knowledge and abilities to the Summer at the Vineyard program. “It was a wonderful experience for me because it was an educational opportunity, but not about teaching in the traditional sense; rather, one involving ideas of popular education, as per Paulo Freire’s approach: getting away from the banking approach to education and instead making it about posing questions and thinking creatively together. I think education works best when you approach it as a collective project in which different people can share different ideas and learn as a group.”

Kray deeply enjoyed having the opportunity to see students used to being subordinate in the classroom finding their place in the positions of teachers and mentors. “It’s true,” she explained, “that you don’t realize how much you’ve learned in your major or field until you start to teach it to somebody else.” She also gained even more understanding of the challenges that go along with this particular approach to education. One such challenge was that of finding middle ground between the students' notions of what to teach, based on their own backgrounds, and the youth’s notions of what they were actually interested in learning. “That’s what made it a real working partnership between the RIT students and the kids. And it did have to be worked at every day.”

“education works best when you approach it as a collective project in which different people can share different ideas and learn as a group.”
Coming Together
Rochester's youth step up to become tomorrow's leaders in their community; today.

This year's summer learning community was different than previous summers in that community youths had an opportunity to be directly involved. Brandy Bryant, Aaron Graham, Armando Figueroa, Eulita Browne, Devin Young, Nick Bridges, Kalisha Garcia, Nathan Dukes, and Neon Dukes comprised the youth component of the learning community. These nine high school students were chosen by leaders at the North Street Recreation Center based on the levels of commitment and interest that they had demonstrated through previous involvement at the community center.

As summer employees working in youth-led teams, each of the youth had responsibilities on the farm including planting, weeding, and harvesting. Additionally, they participated in experiential learning projects and community-based participatory research working side-by-side with the RIT students in small group workshops. These workshops were designed to further the connection of hands-on learning on the farm to practical life and job skills and aspects of community building, the youth participation also expanded the research already being done by the RIT participants by including the voice and experience of community youth. The working relationships developed between the groups allowed for the open discussion of ideas as well as practical application through working in the fields together. As RIT students introduced new concepts, for example, the importance of pesticide-free produce, the youth were encouraged to contribute their ideas of how to apply the knowledge. This design encouraged the development of positive youth-adult partnerships and genuine friendships, as both the youth and RIT students found they had a lot to learn from one another.

Brandy
Most interested in learning about the nutrition discussion and how diseases can occur from not eating healthy foods, her favorite field trip was to Crystal Barn where she participated in cooking. This opportunity brought her attention to how hot a restaurant kitchen can be while working. She enjoyed her team and had a lot of fun.

Aaron
He was fascinated with nutrition and learning about which foods are filled with certain nutrients. He believes that this summer opportunity will greatly benefit his future and how he can continue to help people. Aaron's favorite memory of being on the farm was picking pears and then eating them, "they taste so good!"

Armando
One of the three team leaders he came to appreciate the labor of hard work. His favorite part about being on the farm was "working for himself." He says his experience, "gave me a better outlook on the community." He enjoyed the activities which allowed all of his team members to be involved.

Eulita
Eulita enjoyed being a part of the learning community. She loved learning how to make websites and the discussion about global warming. She was excited to visit Crystal Barn and make fried green tomatoes. Eulita believes she benefited from this experience because it has helped her become more mature and responsible.

Devin
Devin's favorite activities included picking crops and flipping the compost. After a discussion about local zoning, Devin really thought about the community. He believes that there is a lot of space in the neighborhood that could be better used to benefit each of us. For example, more parks to keep kids off the streets.

Neon
Neon's favorite memory of working on the farm was "working with the RIT students." He enjoyed their company and their workshops. He enjoyed all the workshops too much to have a particular favorite. He believes this summer experience will benefit his future.

Kalisha
Kalisha was one of the team leaders. She benefited by learning how to lead a team and work through problem solving activities. She enjoyed the visit to Wegmans (in Pittsford) and being able to go behind the scenes. She enjoyed learning how to use graphic computer programs, and came to appreciate the benefits of hard work.

Nicki
"This summer experience affected my ideas on my community because I now know how important things in the community are and how having a good community is important." Nicki enjoyed being a part of the farm and helping her team out with activities. She benefited most from "having learned how to be a better teammate."

Nate
His summer experience made him realize "that the community has a lot to offer and is very caring." His favorite workshop included learning about the computer program Photoshop. He says he benefited most by learning how to work in groups and learning how to get along with co-workers.
A Summer to Remember...

Whenever people anywhere come together united by the common goal to learn from each other, wonderful things will happen. This summer’s experience at The Vineyard was no exception. By sharing this learning experience with Rochester's youth, RIT students were given the opportunity to put their education to work while gaining insight into the nature of the different communities within the city. By sharing their community with the students from RIT, Rochester's youth were able to gain first hand experience, education, and leadership skills. The two groups came together to help create a community experience of immeasurable value, in which everyone worked side by side toward accomplishing a goal that was greater than the sum of its parts. The lessons learned by all will not soon be forgotten.
Shirley Edwards, Director of the North East Neighborhood Alliance (left), shares a moment with project director, Ann Howard (right). Shirley oversees vineyard operations, dedicating much of her time to making sure that things run smoothly, while Ann spends her time focusing on making sure that the RIT student's projects effectively meet the goals of the community.