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Community and University

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Kathleen Glenister Roberts

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Roberts is the author of *Alterity & Narrative* (SUNY Press, 2007), which won the International/Intercultural Communication Book of the Year Award from the National Communication Association. She has also written numerous essays, the most recent of which appears in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. She has been an International Folklore Fellow, a PFF Teaching Fellow, and the recipient of numerous awards for scholarship and teaching, including Duquesne's Presidential Scholarship Award (2005).

Service to others is an integral part of the Spiritan charism at Duquesne University and manifests itself in many forms. In a formal academic sense, *service-learning* is distinctive at Duquesne because it combines significant study in the academic disciplines with community engagement. In a spiritual sense, service-learning is distinctive at Duquesne because it is derived from Spiritan commitments to social justice. Students in service-learning courses come to understand how their academic studies uniquely prepare them for a lifetime of service. The time students share with community partners through service-learning is reflective, meaningful, and situated in learning goals.

Service-learning has grown exponentially at Duquesne over the past decade, and this past year a new iteration of community engagement emerged with the university's first *Signature Partnership*. A Signature Partnership is a long-term, mutual commitment to both breadth and depth in community-engaged teaching and research. It is modeled after Spiritan practices of community engagement, which privilege intentional learning, inculturation, and genuine relationships. With their emphasis on sustainability, Signature Partnerships may well be best-suited to multidisciplinary undergraduate entities in the university.

The Signature Partnership concept is particularly well-suited to Duquesne University's Honors College, for several reasons. First, in practical terms, the Honors College serves students from all eight traditional undergraduate schools at Duquesne. Within their programs, honors students undertake service-learning and undergraduate research at a variety of levels. Some depend on the Honors College for an opportunity to fulfill their service-learning requirement, but honors students also benefit from more community engagement opportunities. The Signature Partnership provides these by allowing students to pursue their passions and academic interests with projects big and small, specialized and non-specialized. Experiences include service-learning, faith-based engagement, research opportunities, and individual outreach. The broad spectrum of majors within the Honors College is important to the Signature Partnership, because students can contribute newfound knowledge in their disciplines to collaborative projects undertaken with citizens and experts from the community. Regardless of who teaches honors courses or at what level, the contact and commitment is maintained with the community partner through the consistent administration of the Honors College and ongoing, multiple engagement opportunities.

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Second, in perhaps more abstract terms, the Signature Partnership is made for a multifaceted university entity like the Honors College because a big, complex student population calls for big, complex ideals. In the Honors College, our learning outcomes depend on not just breadth of study, but also great depth. Like all of Duquesne we are based on the five pillars of the Spiritan charism (academic excellence, moral and spiritual values, service to others, global concerns, ecumenism). In addition we encourage students to emerge from their baccalaureate studies with sophisticated contributions in four honors emphasis areas: Creative and Critical Thinking, Humanities-Based Learning, Leadership and Service, and Global Perspectives. A Signature Partnership allows the time and level of relationship needed for these outcomes to be realized. More importantly, the long-term commitment increases the likelihood that a community partner will see lasting benefits from the relationship, and that the Honors College can grow, change, and be humbled in a spirit of reciprocity.

During the spring semester of 2012, Duquesne professor Dr. Evan Stoddard led an honors seminar entitled “Community and University.” The course has been offered to honors students each spring for the last several years, but with the inauguration of the Signature Partnership model, in 2012 the seminar of ten students had a new mission: to create a strategic plan for the Signature Partnership that would solidify the relationship between the Duquesne Honors College and the Daisy Wilson Artist Community and outline meaningful, mutually beneficial goals on which they could cooperate over the next five years.

Perhaps by virtue of the course being offered at Duquesne and in the context of a superb service-learning model established by the Office of Academic Community Engagement, the way that the students set out to accomplish this mission was distinctly Spiritan in its approach. The story of the partnership is a unique and remarkable one, as the Spiritan model of service and community engagement informed both the values and praxis of the seminar throughout the semester. These pages tell the story of the students’ journey, but also the opening of a significant community relationship.

In order to provide a framework for understanding this relationship, the first part of this essay describes service-learning and its challenges. Then we delve into the project itself, noting how the choices honors students made, the activities they engaged in, and the hopes both partners hold for a lasting commitment to social justice were shaped by a Spiritan model of service.

Reflection activities are crucial to distinguishing service-learning from extracurricular volunteer hours.

In the past decade, scholars have examined both the benefits and the challenges of service-learning. The positive outcomes appear to be robust. In service-learning, service is curricular: it occurs in the context of an academic course. Reflection activities are crucial to distinguishing service-learning from extracurricular volunteer hours.¹ Students who complete service-learning courses seem to develop an appreciation for serving others, and they also “make greater increases in moral reasoning and critical thinking, are more tolerant, perform better academically...and take greater interest in civic responsibility.”²

As an established experiential pedagogy, service-learning has been tested and evaluated often. The National Association for Experiential Education, for instance, lists the following “best practices” for service learning: “intention, authenticity, planning, clarity, orientation, training and mentoring, monitoring and assessment, continuous improvement, reflection, evaluation, and acknowledgment.”³ Of these, again, reflection is especially crucial – particularly for Catholic universities. At Duquesne University, for instance, observations, focus groups, surveys, and other assessments indicate that students commonly embrace service as an everyday ethic. Yet reflecting on deeper social justice issues is always important. As Artz (2001) has argued, if service is posited merely as charity, there is not enough learning taking place. Without reflection, “students become aware of a particular injustice...[but] stop short of serious consideration of the fundamental systemic practices and relations that give rise to the injustice.”⁴

While service-learning has been analyzed and critiqued heavily, one problem yet to be ameliorated is the rather thin philosophical ground on which service-learning sometimes stands.⁵ Fritz and Roberts⁶ recognized this challenge and suggested as a first step that service-learning should be situated in the *missions* of given institutions. Holland⁷ agrees that service-learning can only thrive where there is a proven mission commitment. Taylor⁸ goes further, showing that such a commitment establishes a moral framework for service.

Catholic institutions like Duquesne University are therefore well-placed to articulate a philosophy of service-learning.⁹ These philosophies might be broadly spiritual or charism-specific. Catholic universities share common missions in the search for truth that illuminates human dignity, justice, and freedom, as John Paul II¹⁰ explained in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The Spiritan mission at Duquesne University is unique in its explicit address

of the global community, ecumenism, and service. These explicit calls are grounded in the Spiritan charism. The remainder of this essay makes this clear and explains how, in the Signature Partnership, students learned to follow a Spiritan model of service. The Spiritan approach makes a marked difference in the way service-learning is done at Duquesne, through a See-Judge-Act-Reflect model but also through loving attention to solidarity and subsidiarity. That is the story of the Signature Partnership between the Duquesne University Honors College and the Daisy Wilson Artists Community. Their joint dream is a re-visioning of the childhood home of August Wilson.

Students as Servants: Following a See, Judge, Act (and Reflect) Model

In formulating and writing their strategic plan for the Signature Partnership, the students followed a process that paralleled the Spiritan “See, Judge, Act” methodology used in working towards social justice and the formulation of pastoral response. Although the original model includes only three steps, many applications of the model also acknowledge the step of “Reflect” as an important addition.¹¹ Ultimately, the Spiritan model of service and community engagement informed both the values and praxis of the seminar throughout the semester. This model continues to shape the impact of the partnership for the community and the university.

Seeing

An opportunity to serve often produces a temptation to jump immediately into *doing* something. There is an excitement involved in taking visible, tangible action or solving perceived problems. However, by beginning with “Seeing,” the Spiritans recognize that one cannot serve a community well or begin to address its challenges without developing understanding. Seeing in a Spiritan sense implies not only observing a community, but also seeking to comprehend its situation from multiple perspectives. It means immersing oneself in a community and becoming a participant in its culture. This evolving encounter with a community impacts perceptions and moves us naturally to a caring response.

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“Your immediate task: Learn as much as you can, as quickly as you can about the Hill District, the August Wilson House, and the Daisy Wilson Artist Community.” These were the words that appeared across the top of the outline of the semester-long assignment that Dr. Stoddard handed to his students on the first day of class. By asking them to begin by first learning about the community, he

Kathleen Glenister Roberts was asking them to begin with Seeing. As one student remarked after receiving the initial assignment, “this seemed to be a rather large task to embark upon, especially compared to my normal course work of writing papers and taking tests. It is a project that will make a difference much larger than a final grade in a course that I took for a semester.”¹² It was apparent right away that this would not be a typical class, and that much more was at stake than simply a letter on a transcript.

Seeing in a Spiritan sense is precisely the way that the class began the process of working with the Hill and the Daisy Wilson Artist Community to plan for a Signature Partnership. The second day of class, the students made their way up the steep slopes of the Hill District to visit the birthplace of August Wilson (1945-2005), one of the most accomplished playwrights of the twentieth century. His mother, Daisy Wilson, is the namesake of the artist community with whom the students are working to re-vision the house into a community coffee shop and artists’ resource space. Leeretta Payne, a life-long Hill District resident and a member of the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, led the students on a tour of the Hill District. As they walked through the streets of the Hill and took in some of the breathtaking views of the city of Pittsburgh that can only be experienced from its heights, Leeretta shared her stories and perspective on the community with them, as well as her vision of turning part of the August Wilson Home into a café that would serve as a much needed third space for community building in the Hill. For the students, visiting the Hill and hearing it described by a member of its culture and community opened their eyes to a side of the neighborhood that many of them had perhaps never considered before. One student reflected on the way the visit changed his perspective:

As a junior attending Duquesne, I have lived next to the Hill for the past two and a half years. Why then is the only thing I’ve heard about it is to avoid it? Why haven’t I heard anything about its quiet streets, its stunning views, or its rich history? ...a simple five minute drive was all it took to change my entire outlook on the Hill District. I know I’ve only visited a small section of what is a much greater community, but now my eyes are open to what else the Hill might hold. Perhaps if more of my peers would take time to explore the Hill, to see it for themselves, a [deeper] relationship between Duquesne and the Hill District could be formed.¹³

As the days passed, students made many more independent visits to the neighborhood to learn more. Some, for instance, attended mass at the local parish, St. Benedict the Moor:

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I was amazed at the sense of community and family in the parish. The parish was quite large, but everyone seemed to know one another and treated everyone like family... During the “Our Father,” it caught me off-guard when the woman behind me tapped my shoulder to hold my hand during the prayer. As I looked around, I realized the entire Church community was connected by one large chain, winding around the pews. During the “Sign of Peace,” parishioners walked all around the church greeting friends and family with hugs and handshakes. So many people came up to us and welcomed us ... This experience has shown me what a strong community lives in the Hill District and I am now really looking forward to connecting the community to Duquesne and building a partnership... ¹⁴(Sajewski, 2012)

The students supplemented further excursions into the Hill community by reading about and watching a documentary that presented its rich cultural past. Perhaps most importantly, the students met on a number of occasions with the board members of the Daisy Wilson Artist Community and asked them to discuss their plans and vision for the future of the August Wilson Home and the Signature Partnership. Hearing the community partners speak so passionately about the project inspired and motivated the students in the same way that visiting the community had done. Each of these activities had the effect of changing the way the students saw the Hill and giving them a clearer vision of their own role in relation to the community, paradoxically broadening their perspective while simultaneously focusing their gaze.

In addition to visiting and studying the history of the Hill and conversing with members of the Hill District community, one of the most important elements of “seeing” for the class was learning about the life and works of August Wilson. As a class, the students read a biography of Wilson written by two local authors that highlighted the important places in the Hill District that appear in his work, and they also had the opportunity to attend a production of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. For the students, seeing the play “helped bring into perspective the passion, art, and culture that makes August Wilson such a powerful figure to this day.”¹⁵ Each day, the class began with a short focus on August Wilson: reading a piece of his work, listening to one his favorite

Kathleen Glenister Roberts songs, or watching a brief interview or clip from one of his plays. Throughout the course of the semester, many of the people the students spoke with also helped them to get to know August Wilson by sharing their knowledge, memories, and stories. Among these individuals was Paul Ellis, August Wilson's nephew and the president of the Daisy Wilson Artist Community.

Studying August Wilson was valuable not only because it made the students familiar with one of the most important African American playwrights of the 20th century, but in some respects it also allowed them to look at the Hill District through his eyes. Peering into the culture of the Hill District community through the lens of Wilson's world and works allowed them to understand and appreciate the community in a different and deeper way. This filled the students with a strong sense of the need for action, and a profound desire to be part of that action. As one student remarked,

Although it seemed like everyone [had] different ideas about what we want to accomplish, it also seemed like everyone feels an earnest desire to help the community of the Hill. Personally, I almost feel a sense of responsibility to it. Duquesne has such a capable student body, which has been crippled by the infamy that surrounds the Hill. I hope I am not out of line in saying that the one thing our class is certain about, is that we want to help dissolve the stigma that plagues the Hill. ¹⁶

Judging

In the Spiritan model, the step that follows Seeing is "Judging." Of course, this word has a specific Spiritan meaning. Here, judging is neither an approval nor a condemnation but rather a necessary part of how we *make sense* of what we observe and experience. This phase involves carefully considering what one has seen and learned in light of what one already knows and values in order to reach a reflective, informed decision about responsible and effective action. As with seeing, judging is a step that is often overlooked in typical service and community engagement experiences, but it is essential to ensuring that one's final efforts will be effective as well as consistent with the needs and culture of the community.

Having learned so much and come to see the Hill District in an entirely new way, the students now had to consider everything they had learned in order to discern how to bring the Hill Community and Duquesne community together in

a meaningful, mutually beneficial, and sustainable way. The class community was crucial in this step. The students needed to share ideas, but also to concretize them in a formal analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for the partnership. Only then could they present a proposed response to leadership of the Daisy Wilson Artist Community and the Honors College. Discussion with leadership also provided an opportunity to solicit the feedback of the partners, allowing them to further inform the students' judgment.

One of the most significant elements included in the proposal was a mission statement for the partnership, which the class crafted to reflect elements from the respective missions of both the Honors College and the Daisy Wilson Artist Community. The final mission statement that appeared in their strategic plan was as follows:

The mission of the signature partnership between Duquesne University's Honors College and the Daisy Wilson Artist Community is to sustain a symbiotic relationship that builds on the strengths of each. The partnership aims to meet the goals of the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, offer educational and service opportunities for Duquesne students and staff, promote the arts, preserve and advance the artistic legacy of August Wilson, and help the Hill community flourish.

The work the students did as part of the judging phase of their planning process was a critical turning point for the class that allowed them to translate the information they had encountered about the Hill and August Wilson and the wishes of the community partners into practical action. One student captured the transition poignantly, saying, "Up until this point in the class we have just been examining our hands and trying to figure out what we can do with them. We've read a lot and we've gone out into the community to try and learn our hands backwards and forwards... I think we have started to look up away from our hands with a more enlightened idea of what to do with them."¹⁷

Acting

The next step in the Spiritan model is to choose and act upon an appropriate response. While responsible, caring action is the ultimate goal of any service, in this model it is not the end of the process so much as its *turning point*: it decides the direction of the relationship partners. For the Spiritans, action

Kathleen Glenister Roberts is always undertaken with intention, commitment, and a spirit of loving humility.

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The instinct for action had been present with the students even from their earliest transformative experiences of the Hill community. As one student described,

Although the main goal of our [course] this Spring is to create a strategic plan for our Honors College and the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, I know each of us has harbored a desire to do something tangible. Since we visited the home of August Wilson during our very first week of class we have been brimming with ideas. If it was not for Dr. Stoddard I think we would have shown up on the doorstep with hammers, paintbrushes, rakes, and trash bags ready to do something, anything.¹⁸

Having arrived at the proper place for action, the students outlined four concrete goals for the Signature Partnership and developed strategies for achieving each one. The goals and actions focus on: (1) developing programming for the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, (2) creating related classes and curricular elements for Duquesne students, (3) improving and maintaining the August Wilson house and adjacent property, and (4) raising awareness about the partnership and the project.

Although carrying out these actions will be an ongoing effort for the partners to collaborate on over the course of the next five years, the class also began to take some concrete action. They were able to make a return visit to the house with a member of Duquesne's Facilities Management, Coleman Griffin, to talk about making improvements to the vacant lot adjacent to the house. Mr. Griffin was kind enough to donate the talent, time, and equipment to grading and sowing grass in the lot so that it can begin to be used as a space for holding events. Students also established a list of ideas for future programming as well as possibilities for future classes and studies relating to the partnership, and they reached out to organizations on campus and members of the Duquesne faculty to establish interest. Perhaps the most significant contribution, however, was the amount of increased awareness the students generated. At the conclusion of the semester, they held an informal breakfast in the lobby of Assumption Hall Living and Learning Center where dedicated honors housing is located. There they shared pancakes, stories about their semester-long process, and their enthusiasm for the project, encouraging other honors students to become

involved. The class gave a public presentation of their final plan to the partners as well as other members of the Duquesne and Hill communities. While the excitement and glamour of service-in-action were certainly present, what the students seemed to find most satisfying was the knowledge that they had set a clear direction in which the future relationship between the community partners could grow and had taken some important first steps in that direction.

Reflecting

Although formally the Spiritan model is known as See, Judge, Act, many times the step “Reflect” is added. This addition emphasizes the importance of evaluating the response in order to consider its impact, as well as to highlight what was successful and what could have been done differently. In some cases, reflection leads to a re-initiation of the See, Judge, Act process and a reformulation of the response. However, even when it is the final step rather than the beginning of a new cycle, Reflection always allows those undertaking service to consider the lessons they have learned and the deeper meaning behind their efforts.

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For the honors seminar, reflection and evaluation took two main forms. First, throughout the semester each member of the class, including the professor, contributed to a blog, where they shared their thoughts and experiences about the specific activities they were working on as well as the project as a whole. Not only was the blog a way for the students to chronicle the lessons they learned during their planning process and experience of service, but it was also a way for them to connect the project with their own interests and passions and realize what skills and perspective they could contribute, as well as the new skills and perspective they gained during the class as a result of their work.

Apart from the ongoing opportunity for reflection offered by the blog, the class also composed a report at the end of the semester to evaluate what they had accomplished and, perhaps more importantly, what impact their project had achieved. Ultimately, the students felt that the plan’s most significant impact had been giving definite shape and direction to the Signature Partnership between the Honors College and the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, and in doing so had also constituted a measurable step in breaking down some of the barriers of separation between Duquesne and the Hill. In reflecting on the impact that their work had had on the communities, however, they also came to realize that somewhere along the way, formulating the plan had also a significant impact on them as students. In a particular way,

Kathleen Glenister Roberts they realized that by entering into a community and immersing themselves in a neighborhood that was previously unknown, they had emerged with radically different perspectives on the Hill District and a deeper awareness of their roles as students, as members of the Duquesne community, and as global citizens.

Rooted in Spiritan Values: Solidarity and Subsidiarity

Sometimes, whenever a university undertakes a significant service project, the way that it frames its relationship with the community is entirely asymmetrical. From a place of privilege, the university sees itself as condescending to provide some service those who are less fortunate, assuming the role of a savior stooping to aid those who are helpless. This is unfortunate, for the university celebrates itself for a job well done without acknowledging the lessons that the community has to teach and the value that it has to offer. In the worst cases, the university ends up fundamentally misunderstanding or affronting the community it aims to serve, or compounding the problem that its service sought to resolve, and even in cases where some good is achieved, what is often seen as arrogance on the part of the academic institution alienates the community members, making sustained communication and a neighborly relationship all but impossible.

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What is lacking in this common approach to service and community engagement are two of the key values that define the way Spiritans enter into communities to serve: the Catholic social teaching principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. Adhering to the principle of subsidiarity requires recognizing that a community's members know best what its problems and challenges are, and they are best able to inform the solution, even though they may need assistance and resources from others. At the same time, while placing a value on subsidiarity emphasizes the need to respect distance, adopting a stance of solidarity recognizes the simultaneous need for closeness, to work *with* a community and participate in it so as to acquire a deeper understanding and a stronger relationship.

One of the challenges that the Spiritans confront in their service throughout the world is that they are often asked to respect the subsidiarity of and serve in solidarity with communities whose cultures may differ radically from their own. Surprisingly, in their work throughout the semester, the students faced a similar challenge. Although geographically speaking Duquesne and the Hill District are neighbors, culturally, they may seem to be worlds away. The students had to let go of obstacles not only

to serving the community but particularly to serving in a spirit of humility and allowing the community to guide their actions in a way that would make a long-term relationship possible and fruitful for both partners.

Applying the Spiritan values of solidarity and subsidiarity allowed the class to develop a partnership with the Hill. By acknowledging the need to begin by learning and allowing the community partner to set their direction and guide their efforts throughout the process, the class sought to uphold the principle of subsidiarity and recognize the autonomy of the Hill community. Moreover, by seeking as much as possible to be participants in a shared project and build a reciprocal, lasting relationship with the community partner, the students sought to act in solidarity with those they were serving, rather than in separation. Dialoguing with community partners and immersing themselves in the culture of the Hill made the students connect with the community and the project on a personal level. One student described how the class' approach had caused him to take on the goals of the community as his own, saying,

The class started largely as a study on August Wilson's life, and the Hill District in its prime. But then the class took a trip to the Hill, and we experienced it, many of us for the first time. We continued learning about just how magical and unique the Hill is, and began understanding why so many people care about revitalizing it. Somewhere along the way, I realized I cared too. What started as a requirement to graduate... just another class... became more.¹⁹

Working from a Spiritan model allowed the students to serve not as detached benefactors but instead to become true participants who were genuinely invested in their work and cared deeply about the final impact they would achieve.

Working from a Spiritan model allowed the students to serve not as detached benefactors but instead to become true participants who were genuinely invested in their work and cared deeply about the final impact they would achieve. They approached their task not thinking of themselves as saviors, but rather as servants: side by side with their community partner, seeking a relationship from which they could learn and within which they could cooperate.

The Spiritans say that this approach to service "leads to a double conversion, that of the missionary and that of the people."²⁰ Guided by the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, the students developed hope that their contributions could be meaningfully transformative for two unique community partners: the Daisy Wilson Artists Community and the Duquesne University Honors College.

- Kathleen Glenister Roberts
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