

Winter 2008

## Steans Center Newsletter

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# Take Back the Halls:

VIOLENCE PREVENTION CLASS LINKS  
DEPAUL, HIGH SCHOOLS  
BY DAN BARON

DePaul student Emily Baas is going to high school again – but this time she’s an intern for an innovative program that encourages teens to learn and speak out about teen dating violence. Baas and other DePaul students enrolled in Teen Violence Prevention, a three-quarter service learning course offered by Women’s and Gender Studies, serve as advisors to Take Back the Halls: Ending Violence and Relationships in Schools, a voluntary program offered at three high schools in the city. Take Back the Halls is a partnership between DePaul’s Women & Gender Research Initiative, leaders from the women’s advocacy organization Taking Back Our Lives and North Lawndale College Prep, Roberto Clemente High School in West Town, and Nicholas Senn High School in Edgewater.

In their DePaul class, students address topics related to teen violence; once a week they also go to high schools served by the programs where they work directly with high school students impacted by the problem. DePaul students in the class also participate in a planning session once a week to prepare for their work at the high schools. Undergraduate interns plan activities for high school students around a specific topic related to power, gender, media or other issues. The class is now in its fourth year and has engaged approximately 50 DePaul students with about 180 high school student participants. For high school students, the project does not just focus on raising awareness about teen violence – it encourages students to become activists on the issue.

Beth Catlett, who teaches the Teen Violence Prevention class, explains that the class and program complement each other. “In the seminar, we critically examine scholarship in the field on feminist and liberatory teaching pedagogies, adolescent development and urban youth,” says Catlett, who is Assistant Professor and Director of Graduate Studies for the Women’s and Gender Studies Program. “We engage with that scholarship, and examine ways it can be useful for us when working with high school students. Meanwhile, we use our field experience in the high schools to inform what we are learning in the classes. It’s a synergistic process.” For DePaul students, that can mean studying educator Paulo Friere’s classic book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” one day – and listening as a high school student shares how dating violence has impacted her, her family and the larger community the next day.

Heather Flett, who teaches the class with Catlett, says Take Back the Halls challenges DePaul students to grow through the program. “We try to challenge DePaul students to form relationships with high school students, appreciate the differences and similarities,” says Flett, a social worker who is also the director of Take Back Our Lives. “DePaul students try to make the



Beth Catlett (top left) and Heather Flett (top right, far right) with DePaul Service Learners and Clemente students

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## DIRECTOR'S LETTER

This year we have again witnessed countless acts of violence at universities and schools throughout the U.S. that have highlighted the tremendous amount of violence experienced by youth in this country. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)), 5,570 youth between the ages of 10 and 24 were murdered in 2003 at an average of 15 per day. The vast majority (82 percent) were killings involving firearms. Even more frightening, the CDC reports that, in 2004, 750,000 young people in the same age group visited hospital emergency rooms for injuries resulting from violence. In the same year, a survey of high school students nationwide discovered that 33 percent reported being in a physical fight at least once within the past year; 17 percent reported carrying some type of weapon within the past 30 days. Such proximity to violence not only results in elevated medical costs, but students report fear of attending school and leaving their neighborhood. Consequently, we are likely to see an entire generation of youth who are even more deeply socialized into comprehending violence as a mundane and natural part of life.

What is the role of service learning in supporting young people who regularly experience violence? How can college students as part of their coursework assist in creating alternative, non-violent avenues for problem-solving? As described in this newsletter, Women's and Gender Studies Professor Beth Catlett's Teen Violence Prevention course offers an answer. Students in Dr. Catlett's course study the social context of violence—racism, sexism, classism, homophobia—and then develop practical approaches to empowering high school students to become leaders in reducing violence in their own communities. A second story describes how Dr. Peter Vandenberg instructs DePaul students to become Center for Writing-based Learning consultants, engaging them with high school students from EXCEL Academy who they assist in transforming often tragic experiences from their own lives into well articulated stories. As you will see, a commonality between these courses is the inclusion of critical analysis and reflection on the relationship between oppression and violence.

This month the Steans Center, in collaboration with Mission and Values, the Center for Latino Research, Office of Multicultural Student Affairs University Ministry, the Cultural Center, Student Affairs, Office of Institutional Diversity, Dr. Rafaela Weffer – AVP of Academic Affairs, and the Vincentian Endowment Fund, opened the second annual Cesar Chavez Service and Values Series ([visit cbsl.depaul.edu](http://visit.cbsl.depaul.edu)). During a series of events over three months, we welcome you to reflect on the life and legacy of Cesar Chavez and make connections between his non-violent approach to fighting oppression, the life of St. Vincent DePaul, and the mission of DePaul University to educate students to become leaders in creating a safer and more just world.

<http://cbsl.depaul.edu>

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In December 2007, the Steans Center continued its longstanding partnership with local parishes, community-based organizations, rural communities, and the National University of El Salvador (UES) through a short-term service learning study abroad program. Professors Kay Read and Tom O'Brien of Religious Studies, Professor Susana Martínez of Modern Languages, and Rubén Álvarez Silva of the Steans Center, accompanied 13 students in the exploration of violence and social change. Students studied the interaction of religion, politics, globalization, war, and human rights in the history of El Salvador by meeting and dialoging with elected officials and leaders of grassroots cultural, environmental, religious, youth, and women's organizations.

DePaul students began by living with local families in the community of San Jacinto, a neighborhood located in the capital city of San Salvador. During a three week stay with host families, students collaborated with staff of the El Niño Jesús de Praga daycare center to provide care and enrichment activities for 110 children each morning and afternoon. Weekends were spent visiting the rural communities of Nueva Esperanza, El Mozote and Perquin. In Nueva Esperanza, DePaul students learned about the refugee history of the population as well as their efforts to rebuild a socially conscious community through meetings with agricultural cooperatives, religious leaders, and youth and women's organizations. Students reflected on the interconnectivity of the socio-economic issues affecting El Salvador by experiencing firsthand "the Salvadoran" response to addressing social injustice and societal inequities through community participation and empowerment.

During the Winter quarter, students continued their commitment to service and academic growth by "bringing home" their experiences to several Steans community partners dedicated to serving and empowering Latino communities of Chicago.



### CÉSAR CHÁVEZ SERVICE SEASON

The Second Annual César Chávez Service Season will be held March 6 - June 7. Speakers, presentations, films, theatrical productions and service events

will be held to tie together the values of César Chávez and DePaul's Vincentian mission. Events are sponsored by the Steans Center for Community Based Service Learning, University Ministry, Office of Mission and Values, DePaul Cultural Center, Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, Center for Latino Research, Student Affairs and the Vincentian Endowment Fund. The series kicks off and ends with keynote speaker Julie Chávez Rodríguez, granddaughter of César Chávez and Director of the César E. Chávez Foundation. The first annual Service Speaks Conference, a series of discussions, panels and presentations by students focusing on their community-based service work will conclude the service season. For more information visit <http://cbsl.depaul.edu>.

## HEROIC JOURNEYS:

# Excel Academy Students Tackle Issues with Writing and Art

BY KRISTIN THOMAS

In an art room in the basement of Excel Academy in Chicago's west side Humboldt Park neighborhood, a heroic journey is taking place. It began in the fall of 2006 when Jeanne Walker, Excel art teacher and Service-Learning coach, approached Steans Center Associate Director Marisol Morales about a potential partnership between Excel and DePaul University. Her vision was of DePaul students working directly with her high school students on their writing for the Heroic Journeys Project, a project Walker created to celebrate the resiliency and bravery of Excel students.

Morales asked Dr. Peter Vandenberg, Director of the DePaul Center for Writing-based Learning and Professor and Chair of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse (WRD) to consider a service-learning component in his WRD 395 courses, a required course for all center consultants offered during fall and winter quarters. Vandenberg agreed and a partnership emerged. "It had the potential to create a long-term relationship between DePaul and Excel," says Vandenberg, "and the single greatest thing university professors can do with high school teachers is to sustain the enthusiasm of the high school teacher."

Excel Academy at Orr Campus is comprised of 443 students, 87 percent African-American and 13 percent Hispanic; 97.3 percent of these students are from lower-income households and many face daily threats of gang violence, drugs and alcohol. In a society where media largely focuses on the deficiencies of such environments, Walker wanted the project and partnership to focus on something substantially different. "I wanted to celebrate what these kids really are about," she says.

One needs only to visit Excel to see how this celebration unfolds. The Heroic Journeys Project is divided into three parts. The project is a visual beautification of the school. Mosaics are created based on Romare Bearden's *Odysseus* collages, which depict the Homeric epic using African imagery. Working in detailed stages, students meticulously cut and glue pieces of colored glass until a visual reproduction of the epic unfolds. As each new panel is completed, bland hallway walls are slowly replaced with vibrant colored shapes and life-sized characters that beckon the viewer to come closer.

The second stage asks students to tackle another, but often more difficult realm: writing. Using concrete writing prompts and a drafting process, Walker asks each student to share his or her most courageous moment. These students bravely bring to text personal accounts of tragedy, pride, hope and resiliency. DePaul students help with this challenging task by visiting Excel on two different Saturdays

for three hours each per quarter. Their goal is to provide support and encouragement to students as they transfer their stories onto paper and into text. DePaul students use the tools they have learned from WRD 395 and as writing consultants to identify the best avenue for Excel students to communicate their stories. Simply talking and listening facilitate meaningful connections between the university and high-school students and allow for significant expression. A Steans Center Faculty Project Coordinator holds reflective sessions for DePaul students during the service-learning course and at its completion in order to help them process this experience.

In the final stage of the project, Excel students identify and examine the causes of social injustice in their own neighborhoods and design small collages to depict the intersection of their lives and their surrounding community. The writing and art is then organized into a hard copy anthology titled *Journeys*. The work can be viewed online at [www.exceljourneys.com](http://www.exceljourneys.com) thanks to DePaul students from New Media Studies Seminar who designed the website.

Complimenting the third session, which is held on DePaul's campus, is a presentation by DePaul's Black Student Union. BSU members share insight on being a student of color at DePaul and answer questions from Excel students. Members then lead students on an informative campus tour.

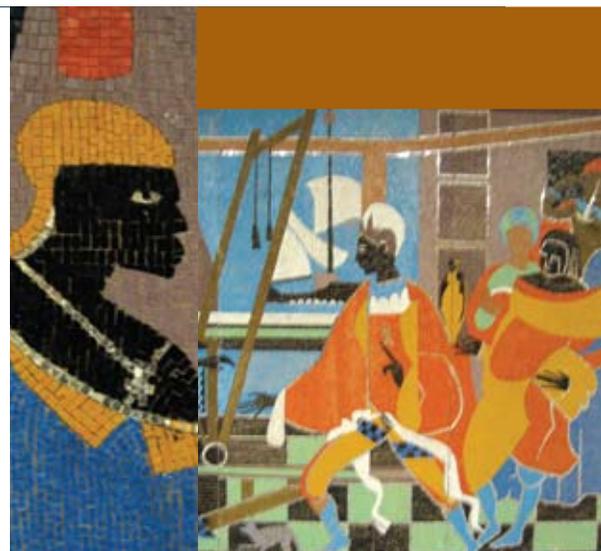
Speaking with Walker, one is quick to realize her passion for this work. "You don't hear the real challenges of the kids, but the writing asks them to share something important and relevant to their lives. It has some meaning

for them. Policy makers, teachers and parents should read these stories."

Morales believes that the overall partnership is a prime example of when service-learning works and the relationship between all actors really develops. "When a public school reaches out to us, it's a great opportunity, and I believe we have an amazing connection here," says Morales. "It's my favorite."

Jatuan Crockett, a junior at Excel found the experience beneficial on several levels. "[It] was the most excellent thing that has happened to me with essay writings, and [as] a junior in high school and having to take the PSAT and the ACT, the help will give me a better chance at scoring high on the essay part of these tests. All my teachers see a change in my essay writing ever since I had the tutors' help. One tutor, Don [Gladish] was like a counselor throughout the course. My paper was hard for me to talk about, and I would cry and not really want to do it. I think that Don showed me [that] no matter how terrible something is, there is someone there to help you through, and Don was that someone."

Gladish believes establishing a relationship is key to the experience. "If you can prove to these students that you want to be there, they will trust you. The only way I know how to prove such a thing is to be myself, to be authentically me. I think one should leave behind all notions of what an education should be. Get past that first page, and ask who is being educated now." For more information on the Heroic Journeys Project and to read the essays and view the art, visit [www.exceljourneys.com](http://www.exceljourneys.com).



## SERVICE SPEAKS CONFERENCE

### CALL FOR PROPOSALS

The Steans Center will host the first annual Service Speaks Conference June 6th & 7th. The conference will be comprised entirely of student perspectives on service learning and community service. Those interested in presenting a workshop, panel or discussion should download the application from the Steans Center website. Proposal deadline is April 11th, 2008. Questions? Contact Raechel Tiffe: [rtiffe@depaul.edu](mailto:rtiffe@depaul.edu).



ENGAGE PARTNER REFLECT

**MISSION STATEMENT:** The Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning provides educational opportunities grounded in Vincentian community values to DePaul students. The Center seeks to develop mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships with community organizations in order to develop a sense of social agency in our students through enrollment in CbSL courses, community internships and placements, and community-based student employment.

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theories they learn in a classroom relatable to an inner-city kid. The goal is to encourage high school students to be the experts on this issue – they are the ones who will get the message about violence prevention out to people their age.”

#### STUDENTS AS SERVICE-LEARNERS

DePaul junior and Women’s and Gender Studies major Emily Baas works with North Lawndale College Prep (NLCP) students through the program. “A lot of students in the high school have experienced dating violence, or know someone who has,” she says. “They are very aware that there is a problem. Take Back the Halls is a way for them to vent these feelings and creatively express what they are thinking. So many times, kids are silenced by the greater Chicago community.”

“This program,” adds Baas, who grew up in Valparaiso, Indiana, “has given me a look into a different community I probably would have not had the opportunity to go into. Even traveling to North Lawndale has shown me how segregated the city can be. I also think it has changed the way I look at high school students -- now I see, more than before, that their voice is as important as

my voice. Meanwhile, this program has helped me put the theories we learn in class into practice.”

Fatima Arain, who graduated from DePaul last spring with a degree in Women’s and Gender Studies, worked as an advisor for Take Back the Halls last year at Clemente High School. “In terms of my activism,” she says, “I really blossomed in my last year at DePaul, and that had a lot to do with Take Back the Halls. I remember we would be driving back to Lincoln Park from the high school,” she says, “and we would be in great moods. The students at Clemente were so smart and so inspiring. They learn that where they are coming from is important and needs to be heard. The experience they’ve lived is a form of knowledge.”

Meanwhile, Katrina Wyss, a research assistant for the program who works with all three schools, says that high school students in “Take Back the Halls” respect DePaul students involved in the program – students who, in many cases, are only a few years removed from high school themselves. “High school students can see themselves in DePaul interns. I think they are more likely to take what interns say to heart than if they were talking to older adults,” says Wyss, who is pursuing a master’s in nonprofit management through DePaul’s Public Service Management Program and collects data from students for Take Back the Halls.

#### PARTNERS

Service learning courses offered through the Steans Center are typically characterized by strong partnerships between the university and a community-based organization; in this case, that organization is a neighborhood school. Jill Bass, a teacher at NLCP who is a liaison for Take Back the Halls at the school, simply says the program works well and fits “so smoothly” at NLCP. “Most of the students at our school have been in this program for two years,” says Bass, who is the school’s Civic Engagement Program Director. “Take Back the Halls connects students to something that gives them a purpose.”

That’s certainly true for Candice Williams. “I specifically relate to issues raised by Take Back the Halls,” says Williams, a sophomore at NLCP. “I don’t think teens talk about teen dating violence a lot, but I know it happens.” Williams, in fact, related a story about someone she knows who was a victim of teen dating violence “two weeks before prom.”

Williams adds that because there are three boys in the class, “We get both sides of the story about teen dating violence.” Two of those boys, seniors Jonathan Hardnett and Derrick Webb, both say the program is having an impact on them. “The first step is talking about violence, letting your feelings out,” says Webb. “After talking about it you realize you are not the only one dealing with the problem.” “It’s something worth talking about,” adds Hardnett. “Violence is in the school, in the street, in the home – you can’t get away from it. Some people need a place of commonality to talk about their experience. This program brings you closer and closer because we see we have a voice to talk about our experiences.”

Students like Hardnett and Webb are also using their voices to promote social change. Last year, they joined many students in the program in a Take Back the Night march. This year at NLCP, students are planning a poetry jam that features poetry, rap and the presentation of student videos on themes related to teen dating violence.

Like many in the violence prevention movement, one of the common links for DePaul students interning at high schools and the students they work with is a word that keeps reemerging: transformation. “So many DePaul students say to me this class and program has transformed them,” Catlett says. “There is a real sense of excitement about learning outside of the classroom, walking out of the ivory tower. They see in a very concrete way how real concerns about sexism, classism, homophobia, racism and other issues impact kids. At the same time, they gain a new appreciation for the challenges and potential of youth.”



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