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View from the lake: Build It focuses on constructing relationships

BY BETSY KELLY

With a name like Build It, it's hard to fault anyone for thinking that the University of Richmond's largest community engagement initiative is all about some Saturday mornings off campus with a paintbrush or a hammer and a bucket of nails.

Think bigger.

What Build It seeks to construct goes beyond the physical; what we are building are relationships. Through a variety of ongoing service experiences combined with opportunities for study and reflection, Build It participants on campus and off are creating a diverse community of individuals who together can spur social change in Richmond and beyond.

In this way, Build It has expanded upon prior community service efforts geared primarily toward building and renovation projects. This evolution has been driven by students and others interested in creating a more collaborative, sustained and educational service initiative. Build It now also includes a mandatory orientation for volunteers and various academic programs intended to contextualize community service activities. A new geographic focus supports long-term partnership. Since the fall of 2005, when the Center for Civic Engagement took on coordination of the initiative, Build It activities have been concentrated in Richmond's Northside, especially the burgeoning Highland Park neighborhood.

Specific Build It programs are defined in collaboration with our community partners: Overby-Sheppard Elementary School, the Hotchkiss Field Community Center, Reach Out and Read, Boaz & Ruth, Chandler Middle School, John Marshall High School, the William Byrd Community House and Richmond Metropolitan Habitat for Humanity. When establishing a partnership, we work together to identify specific volunteer activities that will help meet the organization's needs while providing a "real-world" experience for students that can deepen their engagement with their academic work. Faculty members in a variety of departments recognize the value of this practical experience by making Build It a component of their course curriculum.

Whether or not participating through a class, each of the approximately 125 students involved in Build It during the fall 2006 semester work at their chosen site for one hour per week or more. This ongoing commitment facilitates the relationships that are so crucial to the Build It effort. Individuals from different ends of Richmond's geographic—and at times, economic—spectrum are able to learn more about what life is like on the other side and begin to consider the root causes in areas where they find difference. As participants develop the personal relationships that bridge these divides, they come to understand more about various social issues and the role they can play in seeking solutions.

Staff, faculty and alumni can play a role as well, adding their skills and talents to the overall community effort. The University has demonstrated its support for staff involvement by offering individuals the opportunity to work on Build It projects for up to eight hours annually during their regular paid workday.

Every member of the University community is invited to participate in ongoing service activities, educational programs or the building projects that continue to take place each year.

Build It also welcomes your ideas for how we can continue to improve and enrich this initiative. A project of this magnitude cannot succeed without the contributions of many, including our dynamic steering committee of faculty, staff and community partners and our exceptionally committed student action group. From tutoring, mentoring or staffing a computer lab to conducting research, providing leadership training or facilitating a program, each of us has something to offer. Build It gives us a structure under which we can pool our many resources, and it gives us the opportunity to connect. Working and learning together, across campus and the community, the change we want to see is ours to make.

Betsy Kelly is service and program coordinator of the Center for Civic Engagement and co-chair of Build It.

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