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Finding the Homeless at Home

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Finding the homeless at home

Maggie steps off the bus into the frigid Wednesday morning air in Willamina. Still early, the small-town sidewalks are quiet, most businesses closed. She looks up and down the foggy street considering her circumstances. A single mother of three, her car has broken down enroute to family in San Francisco. She has no phone and only \$20 to last the week.

What now?

She breathes deeply and pushes through the first open door to seek help.



Alex Hartmann '11, left, listens as a Yamhill County resident explains her struggle to find and keep affordable and permanent housing in the McMinnville area. Hartmann and other students in Rob Gardner's classes learn about a variety of issues including rural homelessness, which affects more families, children and elderly, and receives fewer social services than are often found in an urban area.



Rob Gardner and Carolyn Blood '11

At age five, Maggie Crawford '09 had a cape and a dream to save the world. She wanted to become a super heroine. "Saving the whole world is a big goal," she concedes. "So I've been attempting to save one person at a time, to make a difference in someone's life."

Last spring, she found herself standing on the Willamina street, a Linfield College student taking part in a class exercise that changed her perspective on homelessness.

"We were supposed to see if we could get out of that situation or what the best recourse would be," said Crawford, who graduated in May with a degree in sociology and anthropology. What she found in Willamina was typical of many small communities – the public phone didn't work, the library, which contained one computer with Internet access, was open limited hours, there was no warm shelter to duck into with children, no marked stop for the bus and she had difficulty locating a schedule.

The hands-on class, Sociology of Community, along with other courses offered throughout the year by Rob Gardner, assistant professor of sociology, brought Crawford and her classmates face-to-face with homelessness.

"As Linfield students, we're extremely privileged," she said. "We knew we were going to come back to our cozy lifestyles, but for that time, it turned our perspective around 180 degrees. In our group, we were cold and hungry and wondering if we would miss the next bus. It was a long way back to campus."

That's just as Gardner intends. He designs his hands-on community courses to come alive for students, who work with local organizations such as Yamhill Community Action Partnership (YCAP) and the Newberg-Dundee Youth Outreach on meaningful projects.

"It's one thing to read about poverty, inequality and homelessness in the textbook, but to go out and see it in your own community and talk with people who are experiencing these things is powerful," said Gardner, a Linfield professor since 2004. "You realize that a significant portion of the community is a medical bill, rent payment, car payment or emergency away from falling into homelessness."

In 2008, when Gardner joined the planning committee for the Yamhill County 10-year plan to end homelessness, he immediately started thinking of ways

to involve his students. Not only did they lend a hand in soup kitchens, food banks and shelters, but they also took part in the first county-wide homeless count, held the last week of January across the nation. Leading up to the count, student teams assessed each community and the availability of resources and helped to advertise the event. Afterward, they compiled and analyzed the data, a luxury for YCAP's lean staff.

Results were staggering – volunteers counted more than 600 people, up from 364 counted in January 2008 in an annual survey of local shelters.

"The work of Rob and his students was critical," said Lee Means, director of YCAP, which provides social service and transportation programs to Yamhill County residents. "There's no way we could have pulled it off on our own."

Students also volunteered at the Homeless Connect event in February, which featured Red Cross representatives, counselors, doctors, veterinarians and legal counselors, and offered services such as foot care, hair care, bike repair, child care, food and clothing.

Most importantly, they listened to stories. Tyler Stanley '09 appreciated the tangible experiences he gained by going out into the community and talking with people.

"So many people are unaware of homeless people and families in McMinnville, but there's a large population," he said. "As students, we can look back upon this time and know we accomplished something. It was good to get out of the

classroom and give back to the community that has surrounded and supported me over the years at Linfield."

Araceli Ortiz '09 described the service learning component as "relevant and practical." The work led Ortiz to a volunteer coordinator position with YCAP after she graduated, work that is particularly meaningful because of her own childhood connection with the organization. When she was three, her family migrated from Mexico to Newberg and was homeless for a time. "YCAP helped us get on our feet," she said.

For many of his students, Gardner said this was their first experience interacting with the needy. Some saw their own hometowns in a different light as a result. "An experience like that has staying power for students. The class doesn't end for them at the end of the semester. They continue to learn about community needs and incorporate service into their lives." ■

– Laura Davis

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– Rob Gardner

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