

REMARKS, CAREER ACHIEVEMENT AWARD, 2/13/09

Thank you, Elana. To receive such extraordinarily gracious words from a student I so admire threatens to un-do me. In truth, students have always figured far more prominently as my reference group than fellow faculty or administrators. They say that's not healthy, but it's the only way I know.

I owe thanks to students, but to many others as well. For their personal and philosophical reassurance, programmatic backing, and outright friendship—I am much indebted to both my teaching colleague Kiran Cunningham and our Service Learning Director Alison Geist. With the barest resources, Alison runs the most amazing shop, extending critical services and program-changing energies to a raft of other local organizations, convincing faculty to take the “service-learning plunge,” and creating invaluable developmental opportunities to our students. On top of everything she finds energy to tout colleagues for recognitions like this.

I also want to give tribute to my wife Mimi, my chief consultant, my general editor, my loyal helpmate and partner through all. It was she who held the fort those innumerable evenings when I was off at meetings or out painting houses in the neighborhoods; she who endlessly supported our children; she who pieced together a weaving career in the interstices of my work. One of my regrets is that she, who has been far more successful in her field than I in mine, doesn't get recognitions comparable to this.

In many ways I feel undeserving of this award for “life-time achievement.”

My commitment to service-learning began a full twenty years after I started teaching, and only recently have I come to realize how deeply it has influenced my life and how critical a role it must play if the world is to save itself. As an urban sociologist I involved myself in the work of the City of Kalamazoo from the time I arrived in 1972. But for a long time I didn't recognize what students could do.

Not that I was altogether happy with my conventional courses. Far from it! Through the generosity of colleagues and administrators, thank God, I got tenure, but successes in the classroom were not consistent enough for me to escape considerably anxiety and self-doubt. Thus it was that my first attempts at student service projects were to a significant degree a form of escapism:

- Yes, the federal grant I obtained in 1987 enabled me to organize the College's Habitat for Humanity chapter, a good thing in itself. But no less important to me personally, the grant afforded a one course-load reduction, and that much less self-doubt.

The three years spent building up Habitat did convince me, however, that a sizeable number of students hungered to break away from campus and engage with the city. So when that grant expired, I got another: to engage students in an after-school tutoring program in the city's most impoverished and under-served areas (yes, and to hold on to my under-load). **But still no service learning, no integration of service into my actual courses.**

This was the situation in the spring of 1995 when I first tried to engage my students as neighborhood organizers. It was a pilot project, jointly sponsored by a collection of private housing organizations, the City of Kalamazoo, and two neighborhood organizations:

- We raised \$5,000 for each of two sites to purchase the lumber, cement, paint, gravel, flowers and the like needed for the residents' self-help fix-up projects.
- Neighborhood associations defined (and thus legitimated) the target sites.
- And three of my most eager seniors—working for minimum wage, on top of their regular courses—took on primary organizing responsibilities for the project: canvassing door-to-door, facilitating meetings, helping residents plan their projects, and then laboring side-by-side with residents, in a series of cooperative work weekends, to carry out the projects themselves.

In some ways the project failed miserably:

- One neighborhood director decided that the student organizer wasn't up to the job and asked me to fire her, and all three students were overwhelmed by the scope of responsibilities.

But in other, more important ways, the project DID succeed:

- After convincing me to fire my student, the first neighborhood director took on the project herself and made it work. I still remember the "pot-luck celebration" held on that block and the stories recounted to me by the participants. The one white family, new on the street, found the project a way to make strong connections with their African-American neighbors. More generally the residents all discovered through the cooperative work that they had much more in common than they could have imagined.
- The second site featured both individual and collective breakthroughs. Bernardo was a 20-something Hispanic who had recently purchased his condemned home. As soon as the electrical system was partly re-wired, he and his new wife had moved into the basement while he set about

replacing all the plumbing, the furnace, and the rest of the electrical. But that took all their savings, and they agonized over the dreadful exterior appearance of their house with its peeling paint and their front yard trampled and bare. They tried sitting out on the porch but found it too painful. They didn't like the way that neighbors looked at their property, and they didn't like the look of their neighbors either. So back to the basement they went.

Then came the students knocking on their door. Our program, which came to be called Building Blocks, provided Bernardo the paint and the extra labor to paint his home; and a little white picket fence out front. It also put them in touch with what turned out to be a wonderful group of neighbors. I helped put on the final coat of paint—a bright white and red combination—and how proud Bernardo and his wife were. And how they now enjoyed sitting out on the front porch, watching their flowers grow and waving to their new friends.

What happened during the summer following the project proved still more impressive. Just up the street a neighbor was brutally beaten to death. Instead of the usual response—families agonizing in isolation, then trying to escape when the first opportunity appeared—the project participants banded together, demanded action from the neighborhood association and the police, and held together through the crisis.

Inspired by these successes, the two neighborhood associations sponsoring the first-year projects, plus two other associations, decided they wanted to participate the following year—four sites in all—and Building Blocks was on its way:

- To free up students to spend more time on the project, to learn to do it better, and to support one another more steadily, I also decided to take my beloved under-load and to convert it into a regular course. That I was willing to make this switch says volumes about my own emerging enthusiasm, and the students' enthusiasm as well.

That Neighborhood Organizing Practicum, offered in the spring of 1996, was my first real service-learning course: and it involved 10-12 hours a week of fieldwork; along with an equally heavy dose of journaling, reading, and paper-writing.

- Realizing how demanding a course it was, I required that participants attend an information meeting, write an application, and submit to an interview, selections, and a long orientation session the term before the course even took place.

It was at this juncture that Michigan Campus Contact gave me the chance to participate in the very first faculty development seminar with Jeffrey Howard to learn the theory of service-learning, an opportunity for which I remain very grateful.

This course, and the larger Building Blocks program to which it contributed, transformed my teaching career:

- As students experienced how much they were contributing to the wellbeing of their residents and to neighborhood revitalization, their own commitment soared.
- The students grew immensely in their experience relating to people unlike themselves in education, economic standing, and ethnicity. As you've heard from Elana, they learned to see themselves as members of the Kalamazoo community and as citizens.
- Students' excitement with the organizing practicum also fed their enthusiasm for others of my courses. Students might start with the practicum and work backward, as it were, to Intro to Soc. Or they might first find themselves in Intro to Soc, then Urban Sociology, and thus develop toward the practicum. Whether moving backwards or forwards, students began seeing my teaching as an integrated whole, and so, for the first time, did I.
- Perhaps most importantly for my psyche, the organizing practicum transformed my *personal relationships with students*. Enjoying huge autonomy in their decentralized organizing—with 10 sites there was no way in the world I could know enough about each to dictate what should happen—the students saw themselves as responsible adults, no less responsible than I for the program's success. Breaking with the general ethos of the College, they began referring to me as “Kim” and so it has been. We help each other, we acknowledge the relevance of mutual loyalty, and we take every opportunity to eat ice cream together. These sentiments go very deep.

My story could end here, but hold on for just a minute. Surprising myself, my wife, my colleagues, and my students, I decided three summers ago to retire.

- We needed more time for our fast-growing bevy of grandchildren.
- But more important, the catastrophic acceleration of global warming terrified me. I would awake at night and toss for hours, thinking of the dangerous world into which our tiny grandchildren were emerging.

So I asked to retire, but on this condition: that whether or not there was money to pay me—and this year, who knows!—I had the right to teach two courses, my organizing practicum and a brand new service-learning course, entitled How to Change the World.

Such a title sounds presumptuous, but this is what we must do if we are to save ourselves. Our wonderful new President, addressing supporters after winning the Iowa primary, said it so well: “I know that you didn’t do this for me. You did this because you believed so deeply in the most American of ideas—that in the face of impossible odds, people who love this country can change it.”

If we are to survive, we who love this country, and this world, must change it. And to do this, I submit, there is no more potent tool than service-learning:

- Service-Learning affords students opportunities not only to learn about the great problems of their time, but also to *do something about them*. As the great John Dewey explained, grappling with real problems elicits students’ highest commitment and develops in them both the learning and organizing skills that they need to be effective agents of change in a democratic society.
- Perhaps most important, as you’ve heard from Elana, students develop into passionate citizens, people who recognize their obligations to their community, their nation, and the world, and who, despite the odds stacked against them, eagerly step forward to participate in the great political dramas of their time.

Thus it is, after a time when *relief from teaching* was my priority, that service-learning has resurrected my teaching career, enabling me to contribute meaningfully both to the world and to my college, **to grow as a citizen even as my students and the residents they work with grow into citizens**, and, wonder of wonders, to receive this wonderful recognition tonight. My thanks to all of you.