Chapter 4

Experiencing Democracy and Diversity: Gathering Oral Histories

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ABSTRACT

The course “Democracy and Diversity” used oral history gathering as a service-learning project. The obvious goal of the oral history project was to preserve valuable stories from the residents of Mt. Pleasant, a small community on Philadelphia’s Main Line, mostly African American. The second goal was to ease the problems caused by student renters in the neighborhood. The students primarily used the neighborhood for partying off campus and showed little respect for the longtime residents. The process of creating the oral histories created a bridge between town and gown and raised the consciousness of the students. The course used a variety of materials and practices to prepare students. One of the residents of Mt. Pleasant, Barbara Byrd, co-facilitated the course and provided a strong link and a welcoming role model for the class.

BACKGROUND

Cabrini University has had a long history of service-learning. In 1989 Cabrini (then Cabrini College) made service-learning a requirement for its Seminar 300 program and for graduation. This requirement was continued when the Seminar 300 program morphed into the Engagements in the Common Good (ECG) curriculum, and the program was extended to cover the first three years of the students’ Cabrini experience (i.e. ECG 100, ECG 200, ECG 300). Any department can offer an ECG course, and the expectation is that the courses will be somewhat interdisciplinary as well as hands-on or experiential in nature. These ECG courses are part of the larger university curriculum that is known as the Social Justice curriculum.

“Democracy and Diversity” is an ECG 200 course designed for second-year students who have had ECG 100 and have been exposed to the idea of community and the concepts of human dignity and civic
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literacy. ECG 200 expands on this base and adds the requirements that students “contribute to a community partnership and analyze dispositions towards concepts like inequality, violence, discrimination, poverty, social justice and environmental degradation.” It further states, “students will increase their civic literacy by gaining an operational understanding of the challenges faced by community organizations” (Cabrini University Catalog, 2016). In ECG 300 students are expected to use the academic skills they have acquired to engage with their community partners in research and advocacy that benefit the partner organizations and the community at large.

The ECG 200 Democracy and Diversity course at first focused on the needs of the Latinx community in nearby Norristown, Pennsylvania. However, the focus shifted when a student renter problem became evident. Although students from other local colleges were also renting in the community, Cabrini was the closest institution, and Cabrini students were clearly part of the problem. The thought was, if students were the problem, then students, in collaboration with the community, would have to be part of the solution.

The Community

Meanwhile, the “town” had already recognized the problems that developers and students were causing in their neighborhood and had organized to deal with it. The community has always been self-sufficient and tight knit -- with its own community name: Mt. Pleasant. Both the university and Mt. Pleasant are part of Wayne, Pennsylvania, a town on what is called the Philadelphia Main Line. Mt. Pleasant is surrounded by suburban mansions, old and new, and Cabrini University occupies one of the old mansion estates. There is a noticeable economic difference between the houses in Mt. Pleasant and most of the surrounding neighborhoods. Some Mt. Pleasant residents historically served as chauffeurs and maids to inhabitants of these larger houses. Today the community is predominantly African American and a mix of professionals, small business people, blue collar workers, retirees, and college students.

Mt. Pleasant consists of three streets and the main street that connects them. One street is a dead end, and the other two form a “U.” There are 84 housing units in Mt. Pleasant, mostly single-family homes that have been passed down through generations but some larger buildings that have apartments. Of these housing units, African Americans inhabit 59 percent, 17 percent are student rental units, and 24 percent are white or other (Informal tally by Barbara Byrd, 2012). Many of the older residents were dying, and although some of their children continued to live in the community, others were moving farther afield to more modern, newly developing areas. The developers who bought properties often tore down the older houses and deforested the landscape. Empty lots became overrun with trash and vermin, endangering the community’s children. This situation was aggravated by the recession of 2007/2008 that made it difficult for developers to raise money for redevelopment. Those developers who kept the houses on their properties rented, primarily to students.

Mt. Pleasant has a civic association that meets whenever the need arises. Through the association, the residents organized and took their concerns to the Tredyffrin Township Board of Supervisors. Individual supervisors met with the Mt. Pleasant community, and Mt. Pleasant residents in large numbers attended the official monthly township Board meetings, making their concerns known. As a consequence, the township agreed to enforce township code violations that were being ignored and passed two new ordinances, one that required a special-exception approval for turning a property into a student rental and a second that limited the number of students who could rent and required the owner to register the student renters with the township.