Sociology Course Working With Local Habitat for Humanity Chapter to Survey Homeowners

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Students in Gerald Reid’s course take a tour of Habitat for Humanity homes in Bridgeport.

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This fall, Sacred Heart University’s Department of Sociology is introducing students to another side of community service, conducting background research to help Habitat for Humanity of Coastal Fairfield County provide affordable housing for Bridgeport-area families.

A large component of the course “Housing and Homelessness in the United States” is working with Habitat to survey owners of the homes that the charity has helped build. Students are designing and administering the survey. Then at the end of the semester, they will present the findings to Habitat.

“The project with Habitat not only enhances the learning experience in the classroom, but also is performing an important service outside of the classroom,” says Gerald Reid, professor of sociology and associate dean of SHU’s College of Arts and Sciences.

In addition to classroom hours and conducting the survey, students are also interviewing Habitat families. The students will take walking tours of local Habitat neighborhoods and will have the option of volunteering for a weekend home-building project.

One of the students, junior Cristin Antimisiaris, has worked with Habitat since her freshman year and has spent two spring breaks in Indiana and Georgia building homes for the organization. But the course, she says, has given her a whole new insight into the people that Habitat helps.

“When you work with Habitat, you interact with the people and that’s the awesome part about it,” Antimisiaris says. “The course is kind of a supplement to that. We’re learning things, such as why these people were homeless to begin with. And from doing the survey, we’ve seen some common themes. For example, for these people, they’re not getting just a house, but a home. It’s somewhere they can feel safe and protected, somewhere they can feel like they belong.”
Reid anticipates that the students will finish the semester with a better understanding of homelessness and housing issues in the United States—and with an enhanced appreciation for the importance of service.

Moreover, he wants them to learn that organizations such as Habitat need more than just hands to help their cause. “As scholars, we are able to contribute something important in a really practical way to dealing with these issues,” he says. “The people on the ground, the ones with the hammers and nails, are what make an organization like Habitat excel. But there are other roles that need to be filled, too, and academics can bring a certain kind of expertise and skill set that are needed behind the scenes to help carry out the mission.”